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PARADE GROUND

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BY JAQUELIN DEITRICK



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To MY mother and father, who are
steadfast in their devotion to the Army
and in their affection for their many
sincere friends in the Service, I loyally
dedicate my book.

ALL the characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary.

PARADE GROUND

EVERY morning within twenty minutes after the Reveille gun had boomed out over the batteries and the crimsoning Roads, they had been off together for their before-breakfast hike around the ramparts. Every morning for two years that had been their official start of the day.

And now they were finishing their last hike.

"Going too fast for you, Chick?"

"No."

"Got to kinda double-time this morning. Got to be back to help Mommy when the men get there."

That had been one of the few times they had spoken, striding and trotting gravely side by side; long red stripes flashing and downy brown calves twinkling back the glints of the climbing sun.

Once Daddy had said: "Same old sun'll be coming along with us, Chick. Won't be leaving *it* behind."

At the civilian dock across the moat and the outer post, a big yellow-funneled vessel was just starting for the North, the familiar sounds of its sailing hour, the drifting medley of mellow gongs and splashing ropes and throaty darky cries, all poignant with a new sad significance.

In the hollyhock yard of the yellow frame house where the granite steps led down, a soldier in dungarees was painting *Capt. D. H. Custis, Fort Brian, San Francisco, Calif.* on the crates and boxes being carried onto the grass to make room for the others crowding out to the porch.

Up on the ramparts above the parade ground a bugle cleared its throat and sent a short gay call lightly out across the quiet noon, and the soldiers tramping along the barracks porches to the mess halls stopped as they had done almost every day for two years to clap and cheer two little girls riding by, standing on one foot on the seats of twin blue bicycles. . . .

In the lilac yard of the yellow frame house, cool, sweet, uninvaded by crates, Barbie said: "What are you cryin' for?"

"I'm not!"

"You are too!"

"I'm not either!"

"Are you cryin' 'cause—'cause you're goin' away?"

"None of your business!"

Running away from Barbie through the propped-open door of the yellow frame house, she looked back and saw Barbie standing alone under the lilac bushes, her small thin face puckering and tears trickling into the corners of her little pale mouth.

There was excelsior all over the government furniture that stayed in the dining room after the rugs and the curtains and dishes were gone, and thick white quartermaster plates were on the table.

"Janny, eat your lunch! I declare, you're just *trying* to be contrary now when Mother's got so much on her mind! David, *make* her eat her lunch!"

"'Smatter, Chick? Not hungry?"

"No."

"Well, she certainly ought to eat, anyway! It'll be seven o'clock before we get dinner on the boat!"

After lunch Mommy was a frantic yellow bird again, flitting among the last of the crates and barrels in the house. There was the *whang! whang! whang!* of hammers once more, and bare floors everywhere, and scarred woodwork, and feet shuffling, shuffling, shuffling. And after that wagons out front being loaded, and the mules stamping on the hard dirt; stamping and stamping and blowing through their noses.

She stood in the doorway, frightened at her hurting heart, whispering: "Mommy . . ."

"Janny, don't get in the men's way! Run along and play!"

Daddy, coming out of the den where the men were hammering the lids on the book boxes, said: "Come on upstairs, Chick. Got something to show you."

In the upstairs den he said: "'Smatter? Sorry we're leaving?"

She clung to his long blue-and-red-trousered legs, crying heart-brokenly. He lifted her into his arms.

"So'm I. Old Jonathan Wayde's a pretty good old post."

"Oh, yes——"

"You betcha. Guess you're sorry to leave the kids too, huh? Sorry to leave Barbie?"

"Yes."

"How about Tommy?"

She hid her face against his shoulder; their curly black heads pressed together.

"Well, that's the tough part about the army. But you'll see 'em all again. That's the nice part about the army. We'll all be coming back to old Jonathan Wayde some day."

It was almost time, but she ran as fast as she could through the postern gate and past the Coast Artillery School to the corral.

The mules were in their stalls. She went in with each of them, down the long rows of them, patting their noses and whispering: "Good-bye, Jerry. Good-bye, Buck. Good-bye, Sheba. Good-bye, Tom. Good-bye, Jenny. Good-bye, Major."

She saw Hewitt, who let her drive the commissary wagon and fixed her bicycle bell when it wouldn't work, coming out of the feed room, but she ran from him out of the stable and around the red board fence and back past the school and through the postern gate, home.

Queenie and Whiteface and Jackson were out front.

"Here she is, David! What do you mean, miss, running off and almost making us miss our boat? You hurry up and get your things on just as fast as ever you can!"

Black sailor hat and red coat hanging alone in the bare closet under the stairs. She slipped out back while the suitcases were being carried to the buckboard.

"Good-bye, Spotty," she whispered, stooping.

"Mur-r-row?" asked Spotty.

"We're going away. The folks that are coming are going to take care of you." She straightened, squinting up. The shiny bald path in the ramparts' slope where hatbox-top toboggans had worn the buttercups away. "Good-bye, ramparts." The willow tree with the broomstick bar still hanging from its thickest

limb. She put up her trembling wide red mouth and kissed the gnarled trunk. "Good-bye, old big tree. Good-bye, bar. Good-bye, woodshed."

"Jan-nee! For goodness' sake, where are you now? Hurry, we're all ready to go!"

Daddy swung her into the buckboard beside Jackson.

"Cluck-cluck—giddap!" said Jackson, and the buckboard went clattering away from the yellow frame house, past the magnolia tree and past the lilac yard and past the gravel kitchen-door road, where it made a T with the main dirt one.

Behind the buckboard Barbie, in a clean dress on her blue bike, straggly brown hair flying, thin legs pedaling frantically. . . .

A little tawny-haired boy was at the dock, contemplating a monster turtle lying on its hard house of a back about to be shipped North; prodding it gently with his toe to watch it flap.

"I came down to see the turtles," he said. "I think my father's going to be ordered to San Francisco too."

"What for?"

She held her father's hand, peeking around his long legs at little tawny-head. Mommy was lost in a fluttering, chattering jumble of friends, crying, her blond head with its big hat with the two brown doves first on this shoulder then that.

A whistle shrieked, and Daddy strode with her up the gang-plank. From his arms she looked down on shouting darkies unwinding heavy ropes.

"'Smatter, Chick?"—whispered in her ear. "We'll come back some day. Look, here's Barbie!"

Barbie all out of breath, down below, small thin puckering face straining up. Tommy, prodding the turtles still, whistling a guard-mount march.

Retreat, and slowly fading light; and the widening distance flattening the pink brick houses of Waterfront Row into stray daubs of sunset flicked out of the west.

"Look, Chick! Over across the gate! There's home!"

Above a corner of the ramparts the peak of a red chimney bobbing. The yellow frame house standing on tiptoe to say good-bye.

§ 2

THEY were anxious to get to their stalls, and they cut the corner by the Fort Brian guardhouse and broke into a gallop on the corral road.

"Whoa! Whoa, Jim! Whoa, Duke! Steady! Steady! Whoa! Who-o-o-o-oa!"

The wheelers sat on their whiffletrees, and the rumps of the leaders came back against their noses as the locked wheels of the wagon ground in the hard dirt at the stable door.

Her hands were red and half closed, with pinched white ridges down every finger and around the palms, but they were trembling in an ecstasy of triumph.

"Good for you, kid, by gosh!"

"By golly now, you've sure got the muscles on you, girl, to stop *them* sons o' guns!"

"Well, gee whiz, Casey, they sure *have* got tough mouths!"

Smell of foamy leather and wet, steaming hides.

Scrape of currycomb, and thump of impatient hoofs on a thick rough board floor.

Red and yellow poppies growing in the sand.

Ducking with a little red-headed boy under the chewed corral rail where old Buster leaned, whickering for sugar.

"Come on, MacDooley! Dickie and I are going to make Gray Liz buck!"

"Janny, for heaven's sake, where have you been? Your father and I are almost through dinner!"

"Oh, I had to leapfrog a hydrant."

"Had to do *what*?"

"Leapfrog a hydrant. Down at the corral. Dickie could, and I was scared. So he went home and I stayed."

"Did you do it, Chick?"

"Sure."

"Good."

"Well, now, I don't want you staying out after dark. Now, remember what Mother says. Drink your soup."

"I don't want it."

"Well, drink it whether you want it or not. It's good for you."

"I don't want it, I tell you."

"Janet! If you don't drink your soup you can't have any dessert!"

"Then I won't learn my lessons right for to-morrow."

"David, will you speak to your daughter?"

"Aw, let her alone. How'd you like it if somebody tried to make you eat cauliflower?"

"Isenberg's in the mill."

"Who—that nice little orderly of the General's?"

"Yes. He and Kelly had a scrap. Kelly's in the mill too."

"Which one's Kelly, Chick?"

"Oh, you know—the General's surrey driver. They were both stewed, so the General said to put them both in the mill till they sobered up."

"I do wish you wouldn't play around the corral so much. I'm sure you hear things you shouldn't."

"What of it? She'd have to hear 'em some time, wouldn't she?"

"David! Besides, people will say things. I don't see why she shouldn't go to dancing school like the other little girls——"

"Well, I won't go to dancing school!"

"Why should she go to dancing school?"

"Why *should* she? Why, to learn how to behave when she goes to dances when she grows up! To learn how to take her place in society——"

"I don't want to learn how to take my place in society! I hate society! I'm not going to any dances!"

"Hmph! People will certainly think you're very queer. Eat your spinach—it makes your complexion pretty."

"I don't want my complexion pretty."

"Makes your muscles hard, Chick."

"Well—wait till I finish my meat."

The gray mists were rolling out of the horizon like the dust of a thousand chariots. High on the crest of the rocky cliff where Fort Brian perched like a bird poised for flight, Janet and her mare, facing the flagpole and the Golden Gate, watched the

lifeblood of the day ebb into the sea and awaited the sunset gun.

"Steady, Starry girl!"

The cannon's voice lost its echo in the fog, and down the staff came the flag, drooped and bright with the dampness.

Climbing the home stairs, her curls were in black dripping strings, and scarlet trickles of hair-bow were running down her neck, but she was lost still in the pride and pain of a certain innate, tremendous love, more intricate than mere patriotism.

Mommy was crying over her writing desk.

"M-mommy—what's the matter——"

"Janet! Come here to me! I want you to tell me the truth!"

"Why, *what*, Mommy?"

"Do you and Dickie ride through the woods at Fort Simms?"

"Why, yes, sure!"

"*What do you do in them?*"

"Why, we ride."

"What else?"

"Why, we jump logs and things! And practise whistling!"

"Your stocking's all torn! How did you do that?"

"Why, a thorn bush, I guess! What's the matter, Mommy?"

"A thorn bush *where?*"

"Why, there! In the woods!"

"Janet, tell me the truth!"

"Why, I *am*, Mommy! What are you talking about?"

"Janet, don't you dare to lie to me!"

"Oh, Mommy, you're crazy or something! What's the matter?"

"What have you been doing? Answer me, miss!"

"Nothing, Mommy! Stop looking that way—MOMMY!" A scream.

"What's all the rumpus about, huh?" Daddy with shaving lather all over his face.

She flung her arms around his lean middle, sobbing into his rough blue shirt.

"Come on with me, Chick."

Back in the bathroom he picked up his shaving brush again. His lean tanned face in the mirror was a queer red. Finally he said: "Don't mind Mommy when she gets like that, Chick."

Mommy's awful excitable and nervous, you know. Just keep out of her way a little while—huh?"

She sat on the tub edge, sniffing back her frightened tears. "But *what*, Daddy?"

"What what?"

"What did she mean?"

The razor began to lick off the lather in long slow scrapes, making a little hoarse rasping sound. She counted the scrapes: one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . .

"Chick, when folks don't have much to think about or much to keep themselves busy with, they have to have some fun some way or other, so they look around for something to talk about. And when a lot of 'em live pretty close like in the army, why the easiest thing they can find to talk about is each other. What they say isn't always true—generally isn't. But, true or not, it makes it pretty bad sometimes for the ones that get talked about."

"Well, but——"

"Well, Chick—" a great sigh—"Mommy heard people were talking about you and Dickie riding through the woods all the time, and she got kinda upset about it. You just forget about it, that's the best way."

"But Daddy, what did they think we *did*?"

"They didn't know, Chick. They didn't know at all. They just had to have something to talk about."

"But—but—what *would* we do but ride?"

Daddy, looking at his daughter out of a grotesque mask of soapsuds, must have had a very bad pain somewhere to make his gray eyes look like that.

"Nothing, Chick. They didn't know what they were talking about. Just don't think anything more about it. And, Chick—go right on riding through the woods."

§ 3

HEAT. Heat that pounded like hammers upon your eardrums and stretched dancing glazed veils across your eyes and bore

down like a vise on the top of your head or struck like a broadsword, beating you down, down, down. Heat reeking of a hundred stifling odors: of running asphalt, of boiling marshes, of the dripping sweat of animals, of the sour wetness of your own clothing. Heat that nailed you at night, a leaden thing, to your bed; that awoke you mornings clenching with your hands for breath.

But at sundown, on Pasay Beach, the faintest of evening breezes came across Manila Bay, crackling the long leaves of the banana palms and stirring the rust-red sails of the bancas at rest with their spread drying nets on the cooling sands.

Some afternoons at Retreat time they rode instead through old Fort Santiago on the banks of the Pasig to hear the bugle calls again.

"I wish we lived *here*. But no Coast Artillery live here, do they?"

"Nope. Just Ordnance. Maybe you'll marry an Ordnance officer and come back and live here some day."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't *ever* marry out of the Coast Artillery!"

By some awesome, miraculous process, Frances Nolan was going to produce out of her own slight body a baby.

It was odd that in the grim aloneness that twelve had brought as its tragic heritage, Frances, coming across from Corregidor with her gray-haired major husband to visit, should be the only one to seem undistant, unalien. Staring at her strange beautiful amber-colored eyes as she smiled with them into the commonplace eyes of others, one sensed the exquisite sympathy of her that was like a tangible thing filling the room. Everyone else had turned hostile and spying. Every spoken word either wounded cruelly or incensed to ungovernable bursts of temper. There were unfamiliar pains, and queer nightmarish dreams with bewildering culminations.

One day Janet ran away from home and spent the night under the hemp palms on the brink of the frog swamp beside the house. New and menacing notes sounded in the heretofore familiar croaks of night-prowling creatures, and in the back yard of the morgue near by bats and owls chanted to the dead.

The cloven hoofs of carabaos browsing in the marshes made slopping, sucking noises; once one of the beasts waded close and blew his hot breath on her arm.

In the morning Mommy followed her from room to room, crying. "Out all night all alone! What do you suppose people would say if they knew?"

"Oh, what if they did know!"

"Running away from home! They'd probably say we beat you!"

Taking her away from Mommy, Daddy tried to talk to her about it all. "Where were you last night, Jan?"

"Outdoors."

"I know—but why didn't you come home?"

"I didn't feel like it."

"Well, don't do such a thing again, will you? My gracious, we looked all over for you. Poor Mommy's so nervous—it isn't fair to either Mommy or me to do things like that."

"Well, you're not fair to me."

"Aw! What makes you say that?"

"You let my things alone!"—a fierce imperative.

"Mommy didn't mean to meddle——"

"Well, she did! She's got no business in my bureau! She's got to leave me alone!"

"Aw, I wouldn't be too hard on Mommy——"

"Well, I wish you'd both leave me alone!"

"Blaming Daddy too?"

"You read my diary!"

"I didn't know it was so private till afterwards. Wait a second, Jan—let me tell you how it was. Chick——"

"Oh, never *mind*."

A wall sprang up suddenly between them; a barrier threatening their comradeship. . . .

The gecko lizard outside her window was crying, but the sound that had broken in upon her dreams was coming through the wall: little stabbing moans. She lifted her head to see a figure in white pajamas go through her room and rap on her mother's door.

The white figure hurried back to the guest room, bare feet

making soft sticking noises on the painted floor. Then Mommy, drawing on a kimono and losing one chinela on the way, ran through.

Janet clutched at her through the mosquito netting. "Mommy—Mommy——" a frightened whisper.

Hands slapping her away. "Lie down, Janet! Go back to sleep!"

Daddy's voice over the telephone in the hall. Emergency . . . Then a motor outside, and shuffling feet, and the moans, become little screams, fainter.

The motor whirring off up the street.

She lay huddled under her sheet, not moving, listening to the soft *slip-slop* of chinelas and the ununderstandable lift and drop of muffled voices. Then the house was still again, and she was alone with the darkness and the gecko, perspiring, shivering. A vision of Frances, screaming in her agony, rose in the dark. Then the vision changed, and Frances lay dead, amber-colored eyes open, awful. She covered her head with her wet hot pillow and prayed in a babbling whisper.

The next morning, on tiptoe, she stood in the door of a hospital room and stared in at Frances, slight, serene, beautiful, asleep with her miracle upon her breast.

§ 4

SHE had grown too fast, and with all the bitter, rebellious heart-break of thirteen she had seen Daddy and the crying servants and the band on the pier playing "Auld Lang Syne" all float away, and had stayed sobbing at the *Logan's* white rail through the afternoon to watch the carabao carts and the palms and Pasay Beach blur away into the sunset and the dusk, and become one with the sea and the night.

And now there were the familiar hills and fogs of the Golden Gate again; and for the first time in her life, the city.

Manila hadn't counted. Manila was little and low and rambling and spun through with green, and so different as not to be city at all. She missed it constantly, restlessly: the smell of its marshes; its moss-grown walls and deserted fortresses; the sweet sad tolling of its bells at evening; the patient *click-clack*

of little hoofs on soft pavements; sunset on the banca sails and on naked wet brown bodies.

Mommy arranged for her to borrow a horse from the Presidio. Thrilling with anticipation, she set out over old beloved roads.

Fort Brian, yellow and white before, had turned dark red. There were new names on familiar front steps; strange children playing in the yards. Different soldiers were at the corral; Casey had transferred to the Cavalry and MacDooley had bought out. Gray Liz, the dump-cart mule, and Buster, who had whickered for sugar, had been condemned.

A week later Mommy said: "For heaven's sake, Janny, I do wish you'd stop moping around so. Why don't you go riding again? You know Captain Drury said you could have a horse whenever you want."

"I don't want to go riding."

Mommy stared. "Why, you used to love it so! I declare, you are the strangest child!"

Then there was Bud, and no more loneliness. And after that, red stripes flashing in parade again, and the old march airs floating, and all the old loved calls marking off the fleeting day. Captain Drury had had a vacant set of quarters at the Presidio, and in August they left the city.

Bud came out week-ends, and in the evenings after dinner there were strolls down the stilted boardwalk that wound through the eucalyptus woods to the car station. Sometimes Bud climbed up on the railing and twisted out the globes overhead, leaving a stretch in the middle of the walk all dark. Sometimes they kissed, and a little ripple ran along her spine, like in the old days when the soldiers at the corral had said "God-damn."

"You're going to Annapolis."

"Sure."

"I can't marry you, then."

"Why not?"

"Because. I have to marry in the army."

"Oh, that's a nutty idea. What do you have to marry in the army for?"

"Oh, *because*. I couldn't *ever* be out of the army!"

"Well, then, I guess you don't love me so much after all."

"Yes, I *do*!"

"Well, then——"

"You could go to West Point instead!"

"Nope. I have to go to Annapolis."

"Then *you* don't love *me*!"

A barrier to the inevitable that time would break down one way or the other.

Hard quick stamping somewhere, and a door banging open.

"Bud! Bud! Wake up! Mommy's home!"

The stamping right in the old storeroom. The click of a wall switch, and blinding light flooding through a little low-ceilinged closet's open door.

"*Janet Custis! What are you doing in there?*" The most terrible voice Janet had ever heard. She blinked up into two terrible eyes.

"Get right out of there and go to your room! Right straight to your room, miss, do you hear?"

Whimpering, she crawled out to the light. Bud, back in the dark, crouched on the old stored-away mattress still.

"It's all my fault, Mommy—don't——"

"*Go to your room!*"

She ran down the hall, whimpers swelling to little nervous choking sobs, and flung herself on her bed, fingers squeezing grubby marks onto the counterpane.

"Oh, God, don't let her blame Bud! Oh, Mommy, please don't pick on Bud, it wasn't his fault! Oh, don't, Mommy—oh, please, God—oh, please, God——"

Presently Mommy came. She stood in the threshold, staring down, and said: "Come into my room!"

Mommy marched ahead; then all at once dropped to the edge of her own bed and, face in her hands, began to cry too: "*Ooooh—hoo—hoo!—Oooooh—hoo-hoo-hoo!*"—over and over and over.

Janet, standing in the middle of the room twisting the sides of her pajama coat, whispered: "Mommy, stop! Mommy, please stop!"

Then, crying all the time, Mommy said: "I've tried so h-hard

to bring you up right—in the way your father's position demanded. I've s-s-sent you to p-private school, even when your father and I couldn't afford it, and t-tried to keep you sheltered in every way—protected from c-coarse, common influences and untouched by g-gossip. Oh, what will your p-p-poor father say?"

"Oh, Mommy, stop! Mommy, stop!"

"I've t-tried to choose for you the right kind of p-playmates and shield you from those I f-f-felt might do you harm. I've done my utmost to see that p-p-people should say only the nicest things about you——"

The front door slamming. A horrible fear clutching at her heart, Janet ran to the window. Bud with his little satchel, striding out between the hedges.

"Mommy, you've sent Bud away!"

"Wh-what did you expect me to do, for heaven's sake——"

Frantic fingers tearing at the window lock. "*I won't let you send him away—I won't let you! Mommy, you let go of me—let go—let go—I will open it—get away—get away——*"

A swift flat palm against her cheek—twice.

"Mommy—*oh-h-h!*"

"You mind me, Janet—you ungrateful, shameful, wicked girl!"

"You hit me!"

"And what do you think you've done to me? You've taken the heart right out of my breast and put it down in the dust and *stamped* on it!"

Out of sight now, around the bend in the stilted boardwalk to the car station. Just about where the lamp globes were still twisted out from last night.

"Oh, I've *tried* to make you sweet and honorable—the sort of girl that everybody would love! I've tried so hard to guide you so that people would never be able to say evil things about you! They talked about you once in spite of my efforts—*Janet!*—how do I know you weren't lying to me then after all? How do I know you weren't just as base as a child as now?"

"Mommy, what are you talking about?"

"Janet! How did you gain the knowledge you have?"

"*What* knowledge?"

"How did you learn how babies come? When did you learn?"

"Oh—I don't know—when I was a little kid—the kids I played with——"

"Janet, do you realize that if you were just a little older *you* might have a baby?"

Outside the sentry crunched slowly up the gravel back road; coughed, cleared his throat, spat. A street car leaving the station on the other side of the eucalyptus woods sent its high twanging drone through the still night.

Janet, gripping the sides of her pajama coat, whispered: "Mommy—you don't—think—I—did that——"

And dropped in a sobbing huddled white heap at her mother's feet.

§ 5

Under-and-over-and-push-down-hard, and-up-ooooop!—and-on . . .

That was the formula that you chanted to yourself under your breath in a desperate attempt to coax your mind away from suffering muscles tightening like vises, finally quaking in mutinous reflex, ague-violent, with every lifting of the loaded fork.

Mommy, in the farmhouse kitchen putting up peaches, said: "Hello, darling. Mother thought you were never coming home."

"We stayed to finish up."

"Did you get all Mr. Putney's hay in to-day?"

"Yes."

"Goodness, no wonder it took long. Is the twenty cents an hour worth so much work?"

"Oh, sure. I made two dollars to-day. I can get a Liberty Bond in three weeks."

"Aren't you awfully tired, dear?"

"Not very."

But upstairs, collapsed face down across her bed: "Oh, God, thanks for letting me last to get here."

In November the Armistice came, and near-by towns turned to a pandemonium of whistles and shouts and tramping feet.

Then the pandemonium was over, and life went on much as before.

Daddy was safe, but ordered to stay overseas perhaps for a long time with the Army of Occupation.

She came in so quietly that Mom at her desk kept on writing. She set down her suitcases softly and stood on the threshold of the room.

"Mom—hello."

The pen jumped from Mom's fingers.

"Janny! Why, darling! You scared Mother so! Goodness, is school out so soon? Bless her heart!"

"No, Mom—" pulling away gently—"I left."

"You *what?*"

"I quit. Oh, Mom, I couldn't stand it. Mom, Miss Thompson and I just fought all the time! And then finally she told me either to promise on my word of honor to be good the whole rest of the year or else get out. So I got out. I couldn't have promised that because I didn't *know!*"

Half defiant then, half whimpering, she stood twisting a corner of the bookshelf curtain, saying over and over: "I couldn't help it, Mom! I couldn't help it, Mom!"

And then all at once the door behind her, swung to, had squeaked open again, and a voice out of years and years ago said: "What's all the rumpus about, huh?"

Janet, wheeling, screamed, "Daddy!" and flung herself, sobbing, against a bathrobed breast, little flecks of shaving soap missed in a hurried wiping smearing into her black hair. Shaken, she clung, crying: "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"—feeling the crushed breath go rushing out of her under the strength of his own arms.

They sat down then in a big chair: Daddy, a little leaner and more shadowed of cheek, and Janet, long and almost seventeen and quite beautiful. Turned away from them at a window, Mommy stood, sniffing still.

"She's been expelled, David."

"I haven't, Daddy, I quit!"

"Tell about it, Chick."

"Why, she told me either to promise to be good for all the rest of the year or else get out! So I got out!"

"Couldn't you have been good?"

"Oh, I'd have tried. But I couldn't have promised—not on my word of honor, like she said!"

"What didn't she like?"

"Me!"

"I mean what did you do?"

"Nothing! It was her! She tried to order me around all the time!"

From the window: "She might at least have waited until vacation began, so it wouldn't have looked so badly."

"Oh, I was going to—I meant to. But I just couldn't stand it, even till then!"

From the window still: "All that money thrown away. *She* doesn't care. And we were going to have such a happy Christmas—the first Christmas we've all been together for four years. We didn't even write her—we were going to surprise her——"

"Never mind Mommy, Chick—" whispered in her ear—"she's just kinda upset."

"I *couldn't* help it, Daddy!"

"I guess not. Not the way it was."

"I *couldn't* promise——"

"No."

"I *wasn't* kicked out—I quit. Daddy——" voice dropping lower.

"Yep?"

"I didn't get to go to France, but I worked on a farm and bought three hundred and fifty dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds and gave everything I had left to the Red Cross."

"Good for you—good for you!"

"That helped a little bit, didn't it? Didn't it, Daddy?"

"You betcha! You bet your life it did, Chick!"

AND now it seemed strange to be standing again at the kitchen door of the old yellow frame house at Fort Jonathan Wayde looking out at one's self nine years ago. And sad. Seeing, for instance, a great malhealed scab of a scar on a beloved willow trunk where the strong limb that had borne one's broomstick bar had been cut away forever. . . .

The yellow frame house, yellower than before, was an officers' mess now, run by a fat, genial army widow for a limited number of young bachelor lieutenants who preferred home cooking to the barracks-like fare of the regular mess, and for officers' families newly arrived, with dishes still unpacked and cooks unengaged.

The scratched floor of the old dining room was hidden again, the excelsior swept away. She had been very quiet during luncheon, exploring on small sandaled feet the haunts of dormant memories that, fresh awakened, had come rushing with a swift driven impact against her heart as she had first, with held breath, stepped into the familiar hall.

She had been roused from her reveries by her name in the fat pleasant voice of Mrs. Brigham, the mess lady. "Janet, wouldn't you like to go out back after lunch and see where you used to play?"

Mom and Dad had been telling about the broomstick bar and the hatbox-top toboggans, of course. That was why all the young officers were looking at her and smiling. All except the tall thin one with the big eyes like a little boy's who had been looking at her ever since she had come in, without smiling.

"May I, please?" she had said.

So, lunch over at last, she had come and stood at the back steps and seen that the willow limb had turned into a scar, and that the little gravel kitchen-door road had been macadamized, and that the lilac bushes, poor stripped twig-things shivering in the January cold, had been thinned to a conventional four, and

that behind the brick apartment sets across the concrete thoroughfare that passed the twin box hedges out front where the magnolia tree had stood before, had been erected an orderly row of yellow and white garages.

There were no mules at the corral any more; no wagon tracks in the dirt. Double rows of quarreling horses were crowded at the picket lines, saddled with flat saddles for one of the equitation classes. A slouching soldier in denims brought her the horse she had ordered by phone, and she rode out onto the concrete around the old fence that had been red and that, with the stables, had turned olive drab.

She rode at a clattering walk up Waterfront Row past the white-pillared pink-brick set that was home now instead of the yellow frame house; past the Commanding Officer's Cadillac, standing in front of his quarters.

She went on up the concrete beach road, passing olive-drab Dodges and the Macks and Libertys bringing the student officers in from Motor Transport lessons on the beach. Motorcycles came after them, and the tractors, ugly in their war paint, their roar drowning out the other sounds and the hum of a swooping plane.

She was thinking still of the General's tasseled surrey at Brian, and sorrel Harry and Nell with their painted flinging hoofs and flowing tails. She knew then all at once that she had come back expecting the old sights and the old sounds: the shouts of teamsters; the crack of whip on whiffletree and hame; the patter of slim mule hoofs, and the rattle of iron-rimmed wheels over crunching gravel and lumpy dirt.

And all that was gone for good now; gone with the willow-tree limb. Gone in three short years of being away, at school and on the farm.

She turned away from the procession on the beach road into the old fortress, passing the parade ground and Barbie's old house with the path down the ramparts grown over that hatbox-top toboggans had made behind it too. As if that old worn streak had never been there, the same as with the one behind the yellow frame house. . . .

On the mainland she rode away from the noise of the town,

slumped in her saddle, bowed by her melancholy—a poignant sense of loss; thinking of Barbie and the little bikes and soldiers cheering on a barracks porch.

She thought with sudden bitter frightened passion: *I'm growing up!*

§ 2

DADDY, coming home at four o'clock from the Field Officers' School, was too tired to go riding. Every afternoon she rode with her loneliness.

Sometimes she stopped under the willows beside the bull ring outside Calhoun, the town on the mainland, and let her horse graze while she watched the young officers riding in formation. Those from Mrs. Brigham's smiled and saluted and she said, "Hello," shyly.

The thin young officer with the big eyes rode on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She saw him watching her constantly from the column, and the day she took the hurdles with the class, stirrups thrown across, Cossack style, his thin face had looked so afraid for her that she had thought he was going to cry.

That had been Tuesday, and the next Thursday his campaign hat had blown off while the column had been galloping in formation, and she had wheeled her horse after it and swung down from her pommel and caught it on the brink of a mud puddle. She had waited with it then, under the willows, and when formation had been dismissed he had come up and taken it, staring into her eyes all the while, and she had ridden home with the class that evening beside Steve Lestours.

He was twenty-one and came from the very far South where the wind was a tireless violin in the tops of tall pines, and you lay back on your horse's jogging haunches, arms under your head, and whistled back to it. He told her about that, riding home across the long natural pass that linked Fort Jonathan Wayne to its flat coast.

Steve's hands on the reins were long and rather beautiful. His dusty-brown hair when he had ridden up hatless had fallen like a little boy's into his meek, wistful blue eyes, and his pale mouth was a child's mouth too. But there was something about

his forehead and nose and chin, from the side, that made Janet think of an almost-forgotten illustration of Jason in quest of the Golden Fleece.

That night they went together to the movies at the new Liberty Theater on the reservation.

And after that it seemed that the whole post knew that Steve Lestours was so in love that if Janet didn't marry him some day when she grew up it would be sure to ruin his life.

§ 3

JEALOUSY was the cross that French-descended Steve Lestours bore on a lean bony shoulder into his calvary of love.

At first his attitude had thrilled her, arousing in her ultimately, however, disgust and contempt.

It was his passion that stirred her to fiery rebellion.

The first time he had kissed her *his* way, in the swing on the upstairs porch, she had struggled free and stood trembling with rage and shock, then wheeled and fled to her room, turning the key.

He had pleaded with her through the door, his voice quavering on a certain note of humble penitence that she was to come to know so well. Then he had gone dismally downstairs, and Mom had come and thumped on the door. Janet had let her thump until out her window she had seen Steve departing, casting wistful, woeful glances back over his lean shoulder every dozen steps. Then she had unlocked the door.

At such times she was sure she hated him. Then again she would be certain that she was fonder of him than she had been of any previous beau. Violent quarrels, always over one or the other of the two things in him that she despised, were constantly estranging them, sometimes for days. Yet they invariably drifted together again.

"You knew I'd come back, honey."

"I'm glad you did."

"I reckon you know I always will."

"I always want you to."

"Oh, Jan—" kissing her *her* way—"you do love me—why won't you say so, sweet?"

"I do say so."

"Yes—'a little.' "

"Well, you wouldn't want me to lie to you, would you?"

That would always bow his dusty-brown head so.

"Sometimes I think I do love you a lot." To make up for the hurt; and anyway, the truth.

"Oh, Jan . . . " his face so pinched, and his mouth, like a little bit of a boy's, so near to puckering. Being in love made people look so funny. "Why cain't we get married, honey? You would love me a lot—I'd make you! We do like the same things——"

"Oh, don't talk about that. You know I've told you I'm not ready to think about getting married yet."

"But I'd wait, Jan, till you were! I'd wait till you were gray-headed—don't you reckon I would?"

"What makes you love me so much, Steve?"

"Lord knows, honey. I just knew from the moment I first saw you there'd never be anyone else."

"But Mom says I'm so selfish and got such a rotten disposition—if I'm as bad as she says I don't see how anybody *can* love me."

"I don't want you any different. If you were you wouldn't be you. You're just sweet—oh, Jan, if you could only always be this sweet to me—I love you *so* much."

"If *you* could only always be like you are now—so calm and peaceful. Oh, Steve, times like last night, when I don't have you, I think of what it'd be like if I shouldn't have you any more, ever, and it seems so—so impossible. I've got so used to you—I don't see how I'll ever be able to do without you."

"Oh, sweet—you needn't ever——"

"Please, Steve, don't cry—I hate it when you do."

"I cain't help it—I love you so! Jan, you will marry me?"

"Times like now I think 'yes.' But I always know that there'll be other times again when I'll think 'no.' You wouldn't want me to tell you 'yes,' would you, and then take it back?"

"I almost would, Jan—I would! I'd have a little time of happiness then, anyhow!"

"Oh, no, let's just wait and see how things work out. It's much better that way."

"But you think they may work out 'yes'?"

"I don't know."

"Promise me 'maybe,' then—give me that much!"

"Well—all right—'maybe.'"

"Oh, honey—God bless you. . . ."

One afternoon, drifting home over the Roads in their row-boat over a mirrored sunset, she said: "Jim Offstadt asked me to marry him last night."

It had been futile to try to explain to Steve about Jim: that there was no thrill in his kisses; that being with him, as with anyone else to whom she might grant an occasional date, only made her the gladder to get back to the dear restfulness of the unexacting familiar.

The silence was broken just by the little slapping splash of the water against the rowboat's flanks. Then Steve whispered: "And you're going to?"

"No."

"Oh, Jan—word of honor?"

"Of course. Steve——"

"Oh, sweet—what?"

"Seeing how I felt about Jim when he asked me made me wonder all the more about you. I mean—it's made me wonder all along, seeing how cold I was with him and how different I was with you, times when you were nice and did my way—it's seemed to sort of prove, I mean—that I must really—love you——"

"Oh, Jan——"

"Look out, you'll upset us!"

"Come here to me, sweet—there's nobody to see!"

On the boat's floor at his knees, black head pressed against his breast.

"Oh, sweet—sweet——"

"I think I do love you—a lot, Steve."

"Oh, Jan. Then——"

"I know. I think I could almost promise——"

"Oh, honey—God bless you——"

"Stop, Steve—please don't cry. Look, we're heading 'way out—better pull in."

"Oh, I hate to let you go, sweet. Kiss me good-bye."

"Silly, you hang on as if it was good-bye forever."

Half an hour later, running hand in hand across the sand: "Steve, tell me the words to what you're whistling! None of the boys'll ever tell me."

"What—'Mademoiselle from Armentières'? What do you want to know the words for? Little girls shouldn't be so curious."

"Tell them to me! Tell them to me if you love me!"

So going up the walk of the white-pillared house he told her some of them.

"I don't think that's so funny."

"'Tisn't—not unless you've been overseas yourself."

"Why should it be any more, then?"

"I reckon it just makes you appreciate the truth of the grinds."

Going up the stairs inside, to the porch and the swing: "Steve, *tell* me about France. Whenever I ask the boys who were there they always say, 'You shouldn't be interested in such things.' Why do they? What is there about France?"

"A lot no decent man ought to talk about to a good woman, honey."

Settling into the swing now: "Well, *tell* me, Steve. You mean the American men were bad over there—with the French women?"

"I reckon they were."

"Well, of course, some of them—the soldiers. But not *nice* men—not the officers?"

"You'd be surprised, honey, the things that happened in France to the nicest, most respectable men God ever made. Why, staid old colonels with families back home waiting for them just went crazy in Paris."

"But *why*?"

"I reckon," he shrugged, "'cause a man's just a beast after all."

"No, I mean, why was it any worse in France than here?"

"I don't know. The women, I reckon—they just threw themselves at you. You couldn't help yourself."

Fear was laying fingers around her heart. "Didn't you—help yourself?"

"I reckon not."

Feeling a little faint and sick, she leaned back on the cushions.

"Jan, what's the matter?"

She drew away from his frightened reaching hands.

"Honey, what ails you? Don't you feel good?"

She got to her feet and backed unsteadily toward the door into the house.

"Go away," she said. "Go away."

§ 4

STEVE cried a great deal during the days that followed, developing a distressing habit of crumpling his enormous length onto the floor at Janet's feet and pressing the hem of her dress to his pale, suppliant lips.

"Steve, get up!"

"Oh, I cain't—I love you so!"

"Well, don't do that!"

"Oh, I'd sooner die than see you despise me so, Jan!"

"I don't despise you. I just don't love you any more."

"You never loved me, or you couldn't change so!"

"Yes, I did. But you were—somebody else then."

"I was just the same as now—so help me, God!"

"No, you were what I imagined you. You were so—so—oh, you could have fooled me forever if you'd kept still, Steve."

"I wish to God I had!"

"But you didn't. That's just the way God makes things work out."

"Oh, Jan—Jan—forgive me, honey!"

"I did forgive you."

"But love me again, please—please——"

"No."

"But why should it matter so? I'll always be true to you, honey, from now on! I haven't even looked at any other girl since the minute I laid eyes on you! I'll be the most faithful husband in God's world——"

"Oh, please shut up, Steve."

"Oh, I love you so damn much, Jan——"

"Steve, get up! Don't do like that!"

"Oh, God, I cain't stand it——"

Over and over, night after night. Then finally: "If you're going to keep on acting such a baby I wish you'd go home! I wish you'd get out and never come back! I'm sick and tired of your acting such a fool!"

"Oh, Jan, I cain't help——"

"Go on, I said! Good-bye!"

"For good, Jan?"—quaveringly.

"Yes, for good!"

Pale, childish lips, quivering, pressed to her hand caught tight. "All right, honey—all right, I'll do however you say. I'll always do however you say. I love you more than anyone in the whole world will ever love you again. If ever you need anything—if ever you want a friend—maybe some day I'll have a chance to do something for you to prove how I do love you——"

She pulled the door to, shutting him out onto the porch, and heard him slip down into a heartbroken heap on the steps, his sobs following her upstairs to her room where she hid from them behind another closed door.

The day after that Dad, coming home to lunch, brought the news that orders were out. "We stay as instructor. How's that?"

Everyone was glad.

"Steve stays at Jonathan Wayde too. Got what he asked for."

"Oh, the poor child," Mom said. "Talk about irony."

In September she went away to her last year of school, returning home in May.

While she had been away, the Jazz Age had come in.

STEVE had been away on leave when she had come back from school. On his return in July he had come to see her at once, and a little uncertainly they had kissed lightly and gone hand in hand up to the porch swing.

Studying his face in the light, she had seen that he looked older, the lines around his mouth accentuated, and bluish puffy places showing under his eyes.

He had affected impersonal gayety at first, but had dropped the pose almost immediately. "I know you don't want to see me, Jan."

"I do, Steve. If only you'll be able to be friends."

"I'll try, Jan. I'll try my damndest to be however you want."

"Have I changed any?" To divert him.

"Yes. You're grown up."

"I'm eighteen. Everybody says I still look fourteen in my breeches, though."

"Don't, Jan—" a broken whisper—"don't put those on again, ever!"

"Why, Steve, don't you suppose I ever ride any more nowadays?"

"Who do you ride with now?"

"Why—you, if you want."

"Oh, Jan—it'd make me so happy if you only would!"

It was Major Dunn, then, Steve's commanding officer and instructor in equitation, who had told her about Steve's drinking.

Major Dunn was Janet's best friend among the senior officers, and since the departure of the classes they sometimes met at the corral and idled out to the bull ring together.

"Say, what are you doing to Lestours these days?"

She had been startled by his tone and incredulous at his next statement.

"You know he's boozing, don't you?"

"I haven't seen him for almost two weeks," she said. "We just

can't seem to get along, and I told him again he'd better stay away."

"I had a notion it was something of that sort," Major Dunn said. "Well, now, look here, you get hold of him and see if you can't straighten him out. He's too good a man to start going to the dogs at this stage of the game, and if anyone can do anything with him it's you."

That very night Steve came to see her, drunk. He curled the great length of him up beside her in the porch swing and cried in her lap.

"I cain't help it, Jan," he told her over and over. "I love you so damn much. I don't want to live any more."

"Oh, Steve, it's been over a year—why don't you get over me?"

"I told you there'd never be anyone else, honey."

"But forget about me—get interested in your work. You've got a wonderful detail."

"I cain't get interested in anything. I wish to God I'd get kicked out of the Service: then I could just go plumb to hell the easiest way!"

"Oh, Steve, you make me feel just rotten. You know I don't want to hurt you so."

"I know it, honey—'tisn't your fault. I'm just—just a misfit, I reckon."

"Oh, don't keep talking like that—you know everyone likes you. But they sure aren't going to if you keep on like *this*. Steve, if you promised me to cut out the hooch you'd stick to your word, wouldn't you?"

"Jan—" whispered—"I'd cut out my heart for you."

"Then will you promise?"

"Oh, honey—anything you want, dear."

"*Thanks*, Steve—but now, remember."

"Then you will let me come see you some more, Jan? I *will* be good—I'll do however you say! We'll go places—swimming and the movies. I just want to be where you are, honey."

So, pitying him, she had relented once more.

And a few nights later: "I *knew* you'd spoil it, Steve."

"Oh, honey, *why* cain't you let me kiss you? It's such a little bit to grant me!"

"It isn't that——" He never could seem to understand that letting him kiss her was really twisting a knife through his heart.

"You let Burke!"

"Well, Steve——"

"Oh, honey, don't get mad at me. I cain't help it—you know I despise anyone that even looks at you!"

"You haven't got any right——"

"I know it, Jan—oh, God knows, nobody knows that any better than I do. I just cain't help——"

"Don't say that again!"

"Oh, Jan——" That was always so broken these days.

§ 2

THE doorbell had rung one day as she had been going through the front hall, and she had seen through the screen door a cadet standing on the porch.

He said bashfully: "I bet you don't remember me—do you?"

"Yes, I do—but I can't seem to——"

In the army you were always seeing these changed familiar faces. Grown-up faces, older faces, aging faces; faces you knew you had known before but couldn't remember where or how long ago.

He stood with his gray cap held against the brass buttons on his broad chest; a straight boy with strong shoulders and heavy-lashed brown eyes and tawny hair, and the accent of the far South too, but different from Steve's.

"Oh—you're Tommy Burke! Dad *said* you'd be coming for furlough with your folks!"

"Uh-huh. I'd have known you any old place. You don't look so much older than seven yet."

They had gone up to the porch then, still shyly.

"Remember the day you left Jonathan Wayde?"

"Yes! You were kicking the turtles!"

"I wasn't kicking 'em! I was just poking 'em a little. I wasn't hurting 'em any."

She had been afraid he could see her heart beating so hard. She had thought: He's just a little kid still too! He hasn't all the way grown up yet any more than I have.

Headlights were coming, and they saw in bewilderment, lifting their pale, strained faces, that dawn was breaking. The hum of the approaching car shut away the night-long sound of the little gurgling waves beyond the pines.

They blinked into the yellow glare turning full into the back seat where they stayed clinging together, still under the spell of the night.

"Janet Custis, you start that car and march straight home! Do you know what time it is? You young idiot, Tommy, do you want the whole post to be talking about her? Get right straight home, now—and *speed!*"

Steve in the seat beside Mom, driving. Steve's car.

"The *idea!* Just see if I ever let you have my car again! You promised to be in by twelve o'clock! I had to get poor Steve up out of bed to take me to look for you."

Started at last; roaring away in little leaps; driving home dazed still from the lingering incredible sweetness of the too-short night.

At the walk of the white-pillared house: "Gosh, Jannie——"

"Oh—never mind Mom."

"Oh, Jannie——"

"Good-night——" so shaken.

"Good-night—see you to-morrow."

Mom stamping into the house, Steve taking Tommy home. Above the steering wheel in the gray light she had seen Steve's face. . . .

"Four o'clock in the morning! The whole post will know to-morrow!"

"Oh, nobody came by to see but the sentry!"

"Don't you suppose the soldiers know my car? Don't you suppose they know who *you* are?"

It had been a few days after that that Major Dunn had told about Steve's drinking.

Then the summer was over, and it was going to be dawn again.

"We've *got* to go!"

Crickets in the honeysuckle on the gray wall quieting now, sleepy with the dawn.

"We've *got* to go!"

But Mom's Dodge couldn't start itself.

"It's our last night, Jannie—Mom'll understand to-night!"

"No, she won't. Oh, gee——"

Her face held between his two gentle hands, he told her, whispering: "Jannie—you're the sweetest thing in the whole world."

She said, wanting to cry: "So are you."

"Write every day—you've *got* to!"

"Oh, I will—you too."

"I'm coming back Christmas, Jannie—somehow. Wait till then—don't let anyone else——"

"Oh, no, no, no. . . ."

Then, after that night, Tommy was gone.

§ 3

THE bull ring was empty still, day after day. Mom noticed her restlessness.

"I suppose you're all wrapped up in that child still. I suppose you think you're going to marry him when he gets out of West Point."

"I don't know."

"Well, I would. I certainly *would* marry a little second lieutenant with just about enough to keep me in shoe laces."

"Well, what do you think I'm going to marry?"

"Hmph. If I were you I'd be getting out and going to parties and dances and meeting people—finding myself somebody who is something and *has* something."

"A civilian!"

"All right—just you go right ahead and marry in the army with the cost of living what it is these days, and you'll certainly wish you'd done differently. I thought you'd decided not to get married, anyway. I thought you'd made up your mind to have a career."

"I didn't say a career. I said I wanted to learn some way to support myself *before* I got married."

"Hmph. You'd certainly better be able to if you marry in the army."

"Well, *can* I go to New York?"

"No! Certainly you can't go to New York all alone! We've thrashed that all out!"

"Well, you could come along, then, if you had to!"

"Janet, you know how I despise New York. Don't talk utter nonsense. And besides, you'd just see what you could do to try me, just as you do now."

"I wouldn't! I'd be working!"

"Well, Mother isn't going to New York. For heaven's sake, why do you have to go any place?"

"You know there's no decent design school in Suffolk!"

"Well, why can't you practise drawing right here at home?"

"Oh, how can you teach yourself to draw?"

"Well, for goodness' sake, you're not stupid. Other people have been known to do it."

"Well, I'm no genius."

"Then how on earth do you expect to make a success?"

"Oh—I don't."

"Well, it doesn't seem to me that designing dresses is such a complicated thing, to require such special study."

"You've got to be taught the principles of it, the same as anything else."

"Well, didn't you learn the principles at school? What were you *doing* the entire year?"

"Of course I learned what they gave me, but you know a boarding school doesn't teach you all you have to know to be able to get a job!"

"Well, you'd better be devoting yourself to going out in society a little—learn a little something about dresses that way. How on earth you think you can design pretty clothes when you don't even care about them for yourself, I don't see."

"Well, I can, and I'm not going out! I hate society!"

"But *why*? Heavens, any normal girl is supposed to love dancing and receiving a lot of attention."

"I do like dancing, but I'd rather do it at home——"

"Yes, and receive the kind of attention you do on the porch swing!"

"Oh, well, it just isn't natural for me to pull the line you have to at dances and dinners—always handing a line to the person

you're dancing with, and being so polite and formal to all the older officers and ladies of the post! Pretending to be so peppy when I'm really sleepy or bored, and having to keep chattering whether I've got anything to say or not, and wishing all the time I was out on the bull ring or on the beach!"

"All right! Just go right ahead! Just do exactly as you please! I should think you'd be ashamed to have people whispering around that you're unpopular and nobody ever asks you to go any place!"

"Oh, why should I go out with boys I'm not interested in? And I don't care what people say! Why should I? Let them think whatever they damn please!"

§ 4

THE tone of the loud laughing voices on the porch was the tone that meant old friends of years ago come back.

They said usually: "Why, I used to bounce you on my knee when you were about so high!" and were hurt because you didn't remember. She meant to tiptoe to her room, but drawn by some queer indefinable force in spite of herself, she stood in the porch doorway.

A girl with fluffy hair the color of amber was sitting in the swing beside Dad; holding out both her hands, saying: "Jan! Little old Jan!"

"Oh—*Frances!*"

They seemed to forget about the others: Dad and Mom, and the old-looking Colonel with deep lines in his weathered face, and the little dark boy leaning on Frances's knees.

"You darling girl! You're just as I'd hoped you'd be!"

"You're—just the same, Frances!"

"She's disgraceful," Mom said. "Go change your clothes, for heaven's sake—I don't know why she will cling to those disreputable old issue breeches whether she's going riding or not! I don't know what people must think of her!"

"I have been riding!"

"Well, can't you speak to Colonel Nolan? And say hello to Donny! Donny, Janet knew you in Manila when you were just about so long!"

Leaning back in the swing gazing at Frances in the failing light while everyone chatted and was very gay over the reunion, she saw vague changes after all in the girl with the amber hair and eyes. Older, of course; Frances was twenty-eight now, Janet knew. But there was a deeper change. She decided that the difference lay chiefly in Frances's smile. A bright, spontaneous flash before, it seemed slower now: slower to break and quicker to fade.

The Nolans went into Barbie's old house by the parade ground, and when Mom drove by every day or two to see how the settling was getting along, Janet went too. And then all at once it was Janet alone who was dropping in "just to say hello."

§ 5

ANOTHER old friend had come to Jonathan Wayde with the new classes.

She had come in from riding again one day, and Dad had called from the porch.

○ "Hey, Jan, come out and see who's here!"

She had gone in her soldier-breeches as before, and stood in the doorway looking out at a young officer with red hair.

"Ever see this fellow before?"

She frowned at him, knowing all at once then who he was. "Dickie Blythe!"

"For gosh' sakes," he said, "but you've got good-looking!"

After a while Dad left them, and they sat in the swing together, appraising each other with busy eyes. He was good-looking too; well built, in his brand-new olive drab; the thirteen-year-old's grin on his mouth still, and in his hazel eyes.

"Gosh a'mighty—eight years ago!"

"I don't think you've changed so very much."

"Neither have you, except you've got prettier. Same old black head!" He mussed her curls.

"Same old red head!"

"But, gosh, you're a *little* girl. I thought you'd be one of these muscular Amazons, you were such a husky little kid."

"Oh, I'm still husky. I grew fast till I was sixteen, then I

quit. I've still got my muscles, though. Feel!" She swelled a round, firm biceps for him.

"Damn if you haven't! Gosh, I'll never forget you almost busting up the stable that day with the four-line team! By gosh, I knew you'd stop 'em though!"

"Well, if I hadn't Casey'd have grabbed the reins."

"He knew you'd get 'em too, though!"

"I almost didn't."

"Remember old Buster—gosh, he was a swell mule. Remember the big wart on old dump-cart Liz's chin?"

"Oh," she said, "I went back. Later. After we got back from the Philippines. They'd been condemned."

"Who?"

"Buster—and Gray Liz."

"No!"

She nodded. "Buster—he'd gone blind."

"Oh, for gosh' sakes!"

"Some of the others were condemned too. I guess they're all gone now."

They were silent.

"Oh, it was *all* different," she said. "I—I never went back any more."

"No kiddin'," he said, "I never thought about Brian changing. Other posts changed after the war, but it always seemed somehow like Brian ought to just go on and on—the same."

"I know."

§ 6

EVERYONE was winding up at Jonathan Wayde, it seemed. It happened that way at this post or that, a lot of old friends assembling again, but Jonathan Wayde was the rendezvous of the Coast Artillery on account of the School.

Dad said at lunch one day: "Guess who's coming to Jonathan Wayde now."

"Who?"

"Barbie."

"Oh—*honest?*"

"You betcha. They were going to Christopher Barracks and got their order changed. Guess they'll get in to-morrow."

They met in front of the school and stopped, staring at each other.

"Are you by any chance—Janet?"

"Yes. Are you Barbie?"

"Nobody else!"

"I was just coming to see you!"

"Believe it or not, I was just ambling over to your shack myself!"

They linked arms and turned back down Waterfront Row.

"I'd never have known you," Janet marveled.

"Well, you've grown a little bit yourself. But I couldn't miss those eyes."

Barbie's own great blue eyes were too heavily mascaraed, and her brown bobbed hair too artificially crinkly, and the brightness of her small mouth too bold. Surveying her as they reminisced about the old days, Janet was conscious of the utter remoteness of the straggly-locked little girl who had ridden a tiny blue bike at her side through two joyously irresponsible years.

Barbie was part of the Jazz Age. Still Janet liked her, becoming acquainted all over again with the grown-up Barbie. Frances Nolan liked her too. Barbie was so completely candid about it all.

"You have to start drinking some time. I started early, and now I'm just that much ahead. I know how to drink now, and I have a grand time. It's a help with necking too. You don't mind necking anybody you have to, when you're ginned."

Once Janet said: "Sometimes I get to thinking I'd like to go back and be seven again, riding the bikes. Sometimes I don't think it's going to be so much fun being grown up."

"Oh, I wouldn't go back for anything," Barbie said. "I'm getting too much kick out of life as it is."

Barbie and Dickie Blythe started going together, and people talked about their being a little too gay at the post hops and much too gay at the Calhoun Country Club.

WHY, what are you getting all dressed up for?" Mom said.
 "I'm going to help Frances."
 "Not—not at her bridge party?"
 "Yes."

"Well, for *heaven's* sake! I certainly think that is just the limit! Going to Frances's party to help serve when you won't come within five miles of my parties! Everybody knows how you always run off on your old horse every time I entertain, and I know everyone thinks it very peculiar, and they certainly *will* make remarks when of your own free will you appear at Frances's!"

She was passing a plate of sandwiches to the table in the corner of the room. Frances had gone to the kitchen.

". . . and you know, the Cavanaugh's actually *saw* them start out from the stables, and recognized their horses tied in the woods!"

"Wasn't he stationed at Fort Grover when they were, three years ago?"

"Yes, my dear, that's where it *began*. We were there at the time, and I want to *tell* you . . ."

"He did pull strings to get here, didn't he? Everybody says . . ."

"Every wire in Washington! He was ordered to Shipton, you know, and he simply didn't rest until his order was changed. . . ."

She went to every table with the sandwiches; then set the plate on a side table and, feeling trembling and ill all at once, slipped quietly out of Frances's house.

§ 2

AND now it was Christmas, and she stood at the top of the stairs waiting for Tommy, coming back to spend Christmas leave at the white-pillared house.

They met in the downstairs hall alone, and she went against the brass buttons of his uniform not minding how they hurt.

"Jannie—oh, good gosh——"

"Oh, gee, I'm so glad you're *back*!"

His slow "Jannie", a real diminutive, a caress; so different from Mom's "Janny," quick, as hard as *money*.

In the upstairs living room, on the settee before the fire, then, whispering; all the world shut out, far away:

"I haven't kissed anybody since, Jannie."

"Oh, neither have I."

"I don't ever want to."

"Neither do I."

"Oh, God, Jannie, I love you!"

Mom said: "I do think you children ought to go to the hop to-night. Everyone on the post is going, and they'll think it very queer indeed if you don't go."

"Oh, they know I never go to anything—why should they think I'd go to this?"

"Because it's a very special New Year's party, and so many are away, and it's up to everybody who's here to turn out and help make it a success."

"Oh, everybody'll be tight, anyway, and it'll be messy."

"Of course everybody won't be tight! You know most of the boys are away on leave, and the older officers won't be, certainly!"

"Well, anyway, we're not going."

At dinner Mom said: "I declare, I do think Frances is carrying her affair with Dutch Heindrichs a little too far. They're seen together morning, noon, and night! If I were that stick of a Caleb I certainly would have something to say—the idiot is so absorbed in his precious golf that he's simply deaf, dumb, and blind to what's being said right under his nose!"

"Aw, hold on—" Dad—"what have you got against Frances, huh?"

"Why, I haven't a thing against her, as you know very well! I merely think it's outrageous the way she's carrying on!"

"Aw——"

"Oh, yes, stand up for her! Heavens, all that's necessary is

for either you or your daughter to hear any mention of someone doing something to disgrace him- or herself, and you bristle right up in their defense! If you want to know the truth, I shouldn't be a *bit* surprised if there *were* something to that story that went around last month. The Cavanaughs saw them start out from the stable and recognized their horses in the woods——”

Janet's fork, half lifted to her lips, spanked her plate. She pushed her chair back and rose and left the dining room.

Before the fire, after Mom and Dad had left for the hop, Tommy begged: “Jannie, come on, forget it. Please.”

But she wouldn't even let him kiss her.

“One time when I was just a little kid,” she told him at last, “people talked about *me* riding through the woods with a boy. And I always was just as decent a little kid as anyone could be. And I know Frances is decent too, and it's rotten for her to have to get it the same way—and from Mom, who's always preaching about ‘people will say things!’”

He said, lips to her temple: “Well, come on, forget it, Jannie. Just don't think about it any more.”

“What's the point of being good if people are going to talk about you anyway and say you're rotten? You might just as well give them things to talk about!”

“Jannie, hush up. Let's go to the hop.”

After a while she said: “Do you know what I feel like doing to-night?”

“What do you feel like doing, sweetness?”

“I feel like getting just r'aring *tight*!”

“Jannie!”

“Well, I do!”

“*Jannie*!”

“Well, I *do*! Why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't they have something to talk about that's really so, to keep their rotten minds from picking on decent people? Maybe they'd let Frances alone!”

“Jannie, hush up!”

“Come on!” she said. “Let's go to the hop!”

“Well, we're not going to get tight.”

"Well, you don't have to! But if you won't help me, why I'll find somebody else that will!"

"Listen—it's our piece, Jannie."

"Kalua." They played it at home on the Vic in the evening before the fire.

Dickie Blythe took her away from Tommy, whirling.

She whispered: "Dickie, I want to get tight to-night. Will you help me?"

"Why, I should hope to tell you I will, kid! But for gosh' sakes, wherefore the noble resolve?"

"Oh, I just feel like it to-night."

"More power to you! You just slip me the high sign."

"Now! Right away!"

"Come on!" He steered toward the door. "Now, look—pretend you're going down to the ladies' room and meet me downstairs. Smitty and I've got a jug of corn in his flivver—I'll get his keys."

Up the beach road it was dark and private; the sentry far away.

"Tip her up, kid!" Dickie said. "Here, want me to show you how? Well—here's to the future!"

He swung the jug of white fluid over his elbow and gulped. Imitating his gesture, she felt her throat go raw; her body tense with threatened nausea.

"'Atagirl! Don't let it throw you! Whoa—that ought to be enough for now."

She leaned back, her eyes streaming.

"Floor you—huh?"

"Oh, no—it just—burns so—and tastes—*awful!*"

He promised: "You'll get used to that."

§ 3

Mom's door across from her own was shut, and the hall was dark from the shades pulled down in the front rooms still. Tommy's door was shut too, but Dad's was ajar, and she tip-toed in her pajamas to its crack of light.

She went in softly; so softly that he didn't hear her, and

stood behind where his black head lay so still that not even the big veins on his smooth dark temple seemed to be alive.

She thought at first that he was asleep, for his brown hands were clasped on his bathrobed breast, and an *Army and Navy News* lay open upon his lean middle, below the range of his gaze.

She stepped farther, timidly; and then his eyes, open, looked up at her, with such stricken grief in them that what she had been going to say went away from her, and they stayed just looking at each other for a long while.

She whispered at last: "Dad——" Then slipped to the floor beside his bunk, sobbing against the side of his breast.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Dad."

He couldn't speak for a moment.

"You won't do it again, Chick?"

"No, no, no!"

They stayed still again, his arm around her tightly.

"Mom and I just couldn't believe it. Everybody at the hop was talking——"

"Oh, I know—I know!"

"What ever made you do such a thing?"

"Oh, I don't know—I just had to do something, after the way I felt at dinner."

"But this didn't help, did it?"

"Oh, no—but I thought it would."

He gave her a clean handkerchief from his bathrobe pocket.

"You hate people's talking—it won't make 'em stop to give 'em things to talk about. The best way is just not to pay any attention to 'em, but do what you know is right."

"I know—I know."

"Afraid it'll take a long time to live a thing like this down—have to toe the straight and narrow in the future."

She cried again, wearily; into her arms on the edge of the bunk.

"Oh, I feel so sort of funny and sick—I've got such an awful headache."

He left her and went into his bathroom and brought her a glass of water and two tablets.

"Take these, Chick. You'll feel better."

Mom stayed in her room all day with the door locked. She talked to Tommy through the door and in the afternoon let Ollie the maid in with something to eat; but she wouldn't answer when Janet rapped. In the evening, though, her door was ajar. Janet pushed it softly back.

"Mom——"

She went over to the bed, and Mom turned her face up, crying.

"Oh, Mom——"

"Mother's baby!"

They sat holding each other; rocking a little, to and fro.

"Oh, I'm so ashamed, Mom!"

"Bless it! Mother knew she would be. Such a *terrible* thing to do, before all the post—all the officers of Daddy's classes and their wives——"

"Oh, I know."

"Mother just couldn't understand how she could cheapen herself so!"

"Oh, I was just crazy! But I was so mad on account of—at dinner——"

"Mother's sorry she talked about Frances. But everyone *must* be careful on a post—big girls and little girls—not to do things to attract attention and make themselves a prey to cruel tongues. It's not like in civilian life, where everybody lives farther apart and has different businesses and different interests."

"I know."

"She *will* be a good girl now, won't she? Make up to poor Mother and Father for such an awful thing?"

"Oh, yes."

"Bless her heart. She *can* be such a sweet girl—Mother loves her so—that's why it hurts so to have people talk about her and say cruel things. . . ."

Two days later Tommy went back to West Point.

They had their private good-bye before the fire. "Kalua," beside them on the floor, had droned into silence.

She whispered brokenly: "You'll think about last night when you get back to the Point."

"No, I won't. I'll try to forget it, Jannie. If I did think about it, I'd just plain go nuts."

"But forgive me—please!"

"Oh, good God, Jannie, I'd forgive anything you did."

"But I'll never give you anything else to have to—I swear——"

His face, so drawn, so flushed in the fire's glow, looked a little as Steve's had those times when he had loved the most.

"Wait for me, Jannie—just a year and a half! You've got to!"

"To—to marry you?"

"Yes."

"Children!" Mom in her room had called twice already. "It's ten past! Now, if you don't get started, Tommy's going to miss his boat!"

"Promise, Jannie! Oh, God, I love you. I'll never let you do like the other night again—I'll make you be good always! Say yes, Jannie—you've got to!"

"Oh, a year and a half——"

"If you can't wait, then you don't——"

"I do—I do! Oh, do you suppose——" her whispering voice broke—"if I didn't I'd let you do like that?"

His hand, resting gently at the pulse of her throat, had slipped down to just above the small round fullness that was her breast. For a moment neither stirred; then he lifted his two hands to her black head.

"Jannie, you've promised."

STEVE had been away again on a temporary detail—Janet suspected that Major Dunn had arranged it—ever since September. Returning in February, he phoned, and a new note in his voice piquing her curiosity, she went riding with him.

She was shocked at the further change in him. Looking still older, he was *harder*, somehow, his childish mouth set in melancholy bitter lines, and his old characteristic shrug more frequent and brusque, almost morose.

Can love really do all that to you? she marveled to herself, studying him out of the corner of her eye as they jogged along over ice-fringed mud puddles.

I think he's cured at last, she mused. I don't believe he'll cry any more like he used to. But whatever has happened inside him to cure him has done something awful to him.

He wasn't as cured as she had imagined, however, although there was salient in his eternal self-pity a puzzling new quality.

"Oh, Jan," he told her once in the colorless monotone that had become his voice, "I wish to God I could see you fall in love yourself some day and be able to tear him away from you forever!"

That, so un-Steve-like, had confused her a bit. Hurrying to reassure herself by the sound of a natural reply in her own voice, she said: "I have been in love."

"Burke."

"How did you know?"

"You loved him last summer."

He said after brooding down at his horse's bobbing mane a long time: "I reckon you've outgrown me. It cain't be much fun to be with somebody you know so damn well that you know what they're going to do even before they do themselves."

She frowned at him thoughtfully. "I don't know that I do feel that way about you any more, Steve. You've changed. You—you've grown up a lot."

"You have to," he shrugged, "to keep life from treating you too rough."

§ 2

FRANCES asked: "Jan, are you really going to marry Tommy?"

"Why, I guess so. Why? You like him."

"Of course I do—he's a darling boy. What I meant was, are you really determined to marry in the army?"

"Why—of course."

"Wouldn't Tommy get out?"

"But—why, I wouldn't want him to! Why, I'm an army *child*!"

"I know. So was I. I felt exactly as you do."

"Well, then——"

"Jan, what does the army mean to you?"

"Oh—everything,"—reverently.

"I mean what makes up the army to you? What do you think of when you say 'the army'?"

"Oh—why, everything I've been used to all my life."

"Uniforms and salutes and bugle calls," Frances suggested.

"The sunset gun, and the flag coming down the staff——"

"Yes—yes—and the flag running up the staff in the morning, and then waving out so bright and beautiful and free! And First Call for Retreat coming across the afternoon just when everything's so calm and sort of *waiting*! And Call to Quarters blowing down from the ramparts at night when it's all dark and still! And the guard-mount marches floating across from the parade ground—and the mounted sentry's horse going by the quarters all night, and the other sentries crunching in the gravel or going by so slowly and quietly on the dirt roads—and the soldiers whistling up and down the barracks porches at mess time—and watering time at the corral with all the hoofs plunking around in the dirt——"

"What a lot of poetry you have in your little hard-boiled soul after all," Frances smiled at her. "And what a lot of lovely, precious illusions. Keep them, dear kid. And the way to do that——"

But Donny had fallen off one of the cannon-ball stacks by the parade ground just then, and when they had gone on talking

half an hour later their interrupted subject had been forgotten.

Some members of the old classes had married at Jonathan Wayde during the school term and at its close, in the latter event stepping off with romantic unexpectedness in the face of the looming specter of two- and three-year foreign service details. The *Army and Navy News* kept bearing home tidings of them and of all the rest of them: new engagements, new marriages, and, with startling frequency, births.

"How these babes-in-the-woods think they can live on a hundred and a quarter a month, let alone raise families, I certainly don't see," was Mom's favorite comment.

"I was drawing less than that when we were married," Dad would remind her.

"Yes, and the cost of living was just about a third of what it is now. And furthermore, I had been trained to run a household efficiently. Heavens, I shudder to think of these little irresponsible flappers—why, look at your own daughter, thinking about getting married a little over a year from now! What do you suppose she knows about——"

"Jan's not a flapper. Are you, Jan?"

"Well, I'm not versed in the qualifications. She's a very typical modern girl, in my estimation—just as inexperienced in household management as the rest. She wouldn't take domestic science at school, you know—it was too sissy."

"Oh, well, I'm not going to do any cooking! I'll have a cook!"

"Yes—hmph. You'll have a cook all right, on a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. You'll have *nothing*. You'll scrub your own kitchen floor and mend your husband's socks."

"Oh, Mom. Why should it cost so much to live when you get your quarters free, and coal and light, and buy all your supplies at the commissary?"

"Uniforms cost like the dickens nowadays, Jan. Most of the boys are still paying for their first outfits a year after they get out."

"Yes, and what about your own clothes? Your trousseau, by

the kindness of your mother and father, won't last forever, you know!"

"Well, if we're so poor we won't go to any social functions. I hate them, anyway! I'll be glad of an excuse not to go to them!"

"Why, Janny, you know perfectly well you'll have to go to things when you're married. The idea!"

"I don't see why, any more than now!"

"Well, you *should* be going to them now, as you know very well! Heavens—just because your poor mother found out long ago that it's like pulling eyeteeth to get you out, and gave up, doesn't mean that the post condones your attitude! And as a young army wife you'll certainly have responsibilities that you haven't now—you'll owe it to your husband to accompany him to things! You know how certain young married couples right here at Jonathan Wayde have been getting themselves criticized for ignoring important affairs! Braddock was up on the carpet for it—you remember that!"

"Well, I think it's rotten—not letting you live your own life!"

"Well, there are certain duties that are expected and demanded of you. Entertaining—do you know how much my last bridge party cost?"

"Well, I don't play bridge!"—triumphantly.

"You'll certainly have to if you marry in the army!"

"I won't! I won't either! I hate it!"

"That has nothing to do with it. Every army woman is expected to know how to play bridge. You'll be an outsider."

"What do I care?"

"No, I suppose you don't. But I should certainly *think* you would. People will think you're very queer. You'll be a drag on your husband's advancement. Look at poor Dobson—you've said yourself what a flat tire *she* is."

"I just said she wore such funny old-fashioned clothes—I couldn't help noticing that!"

"That's because he's so in debt, Jan. She can't have any new ones. Don't say anything to anyone, but his C. O. is handling his payments for him. They're only drawing seventy-five a month."

"Well, you both tell me how broke we'll be, and then you won't let me go to New York so I could learn how to help out. If you'd let me go and study——"

"Now, we're not going to thrash that all out again."

So on, on and on, through lunch or dinner, as the case might happen to be.

§ 3

SHE rode alone up the concrete of Waterfront Row and cut across the greening grass where the batteries began, to the shore.

Little figures far ahead were moving about on the sand. The colors of the camouflaged tractors sprang dazzling under the sun.

She rode on, close to them; then halted, watching the one rocking down the slope of a battery, digging its nose into the deep sand at the base and plowing free.

She saw a head above, brighter than the tractor's sides. An arm in denims beckoned. "Hey, come on for a ride!"

She tied her horse to a tree by the battery's hill, and ran across the sand, her heart pounding in sudden almost unbearable release from loneliness.

"Want to drive her?"

"Sure!"

"Here, grab this. Give her the gas! Be sure and stop her at the stable!"

They went up the hill again and rocked on the edge of the battery's pit. Down again, they rode up on a barrel, crushing it into the sand; plowing out then to the water. They had to shout over the din, and the engine stalled in the edge of the bay, and Dickie got out to crank, laughing, knee deep in the waves.

"Hot dog! I'd like to be doing this tight!"

The class went home, a procession of tractors and motorcycles down the line of the batteries. She rode on up the beach away from the post, lonelier than before.

She said: "Mom, I *have* to go to New York."

"Janny, now don't keep pestering Mother. Heavens, you act

about two years old. Mother's told you she's not going to live in New York—nasty, dirty, noisy place! You used to hate the city so—why this sudden mad desire to go and live in it again I certainly don't see!"

"Oh, don't act dumb—you know I want to study! Anyway, you don't have to come too."

"Well, now you know perfectly well I'm not going to allow you to go by yourself. Goodness—with hundreds of girls disappearing every day and never being heard of again! I don't know what people would think if they heard you were going to New York alone. They'd certainly think I was out of my mind!"

She said to Dad, pleading: "Oh, can't you make Mom be reasonable? Or else you just let me go?"

He thought about it a long while.

"Guess we ought to get Mom talked around—she'd take it pretty hard if you went without her agreeing. She'd take the first boat up and bring you back, or else worry herself all nervous and sick. We better both just kinda keep at her."

"But she's so unreasonable!"

"Maybe she's kinda thinking about the expense too."

"But there wouldn't *be* any expense for you and her! I'd use my own money—my Liberty Bond money—I've told her that!"

"Think you've got enough to pay for your course and live on?"

"Yes! If I was careful how I lived!"

"Well, so far as that goes, I guess we could help out some. I know Mom's kinda skimping on the cash, though, since she got that bee in her bonnet to save up to go to Europe some time."

"Well, I wouldn't expect anything! I'd make my money do! And she doesn't have to tag along!"

"She thinks she does. Guess she never will get the idea you're old enough to take care of yourself."

"Well, then do *you* think I am?"—so eagerly.

He said: "Oh, I guess you could get along all right."

"Then let me go!"

He frowned about it a long while. "Maybe if we wait a little longer Mom'll get reasonable. We'll keep on working on her."

She stood before him shaken by the passion of her earnestness.

"Oh, Dad," she told him, "If she doesn't—or if you *don't* just let me go—I don't know what will happen! I'm getting so—so just sort of *crazy*, inside. . . ."

§ 4

FRANCES was making her costume for the Lang Field masquerade.

"It'll be a wonderful party, Jan. I wish you were coming."

"I am."

"You are?"

"Wally Hearn, that aviator that keeps calling up, asked me. So I decided to go."

"Well, I'm glad. You've needed to get out for so long."

After a few moments Janet said: "It'll be a wet party."

"Of course. The Lang ones always are."

Frances went to give Donny some bread and butter.

"Who's dragging Barbie?" she asked as she came back.

"Dickie, I guess."

"Why, Jan—the way you said that."

"Did I?"

"Jan Custis. I actually believe you're jealous of Barbie!"

"How can I be jealous when she isn't in love with him and says I can have him? And anyhow, I only want him to play around with—like we used to when we were little kids together at Brian."

"You couldn't very well drive the mule teams now," Frances smiled, "even if there were mule teams still."

"No, but—just play in the same spirit——"

"Well, Barbie says you can have him, doesn't she?"

"Oh, Frances—that's just the irony of it. Try and get him! He just thinks I'm a flat tire!"

"How do you know that?"

"He told her! He said I was a knockout the night of the New Year's hop—he decided then I was just his style. But I've been just a flat tire ever since."

"Well," Frances said, "I don't believe I'd worry about him if I were you, kid dear."

"But I can't seem to help it."

Frances looked at her. "When you get home write Tommy a nice long letter."

Strolling arm in arm with Barbie around the old barracks road to the Post Exchange, Janet said: "Soldiers seem so different nowadays."

"They certainly do give you the o. o. different."

"They're a different type from the old days."

"Oh, boloney. It's because we're big girls now."

"No, I think they're different too. They never were fresh with the big girls then."

"Wouldn't we wow 'em if we rode by standing up on a couple of bikes now! Oh, baby!"

Over their soda glasses at the Post Exchange counter Janet asked: "Aren't you in love with him yet?"

"No. Not the slightest bit, ol' girl."

"Is he with you?"

"Not by a damn sight. I tell you he just likes me 'cause I'm dizzy and we drink the same way."

She said then: "What would you do if—if you didn't go out with him any more—at least, not so much?"

"Go with somebody else. He's a good kid, but I wouldn't really miss him specially."

"Well—thanks. I just wanted to know—for sure."

"Why? What's up?"

"Oh—nothing."

"You're going to get tight to-night at the Lang party, I bet!"

"Well, good luck, ol' girl," Barbie said then. "Golly, Jan—if it'd ever have done any good for me to tell him what a keen kid you are——"

"Oh, I know—that's all right."

"He's just got to have somebody that's like him—not just peppy, but that really likes her liquor. If you get him, Jan, you'll have to drink like hell."

"I know it," she said.

§ 5

CHURCH CALL blowing down from the ramparts woke her, and she sat up quickly, staring into the morning. She rolled away from the sunlight then and pulled the covers over her head and stayed rigid and still, knees to her chin, for a long while.

At last she got out of bed and dressed, going softly past Mom's shut door to Dad's room; but his bunk, made up neatly, was empty.

Standing listening, she heard him walking somewhere, and went downstairs, following the sound of his soft, slow strides.

He was out on the front porch pacing up and down its length. Standing in the doorway she said, "Dad——" bracing herself for the sight of his eyes.

He turned, and she said: "Dad—let's talk about it."

He came in without saying anything, and they went together into the downstairs study and closed the door.

She whispered, standing beside him where he sat at his desk, his black head bowed: "I *had* to do it, Dad——"

He couldn't answer, and she said, her voice rising: "I begged you to let me go study—I knew how I was feeling—I told you I didn't know what would happen if I didn't go!"

"You promised——" His voice shook.

"I didn't say, 'I promise'—I just said I wouldn't! I thought I wouldn't—then."

He didn't answer.

"And I didn't do like the other time this time—did I?" she cried. "I wasn't drunk—nobody'd have known if Major Dunlap hadn't seen us taking a shot on the balcony! You and Mom wouldn't even have known—until I told you! I was going to tell you—I wasn't going to put it over on you! But I was just going to prove first, to myself and everybody, that I *could* take a few shots and not be like I was New Year's!"

"Well, now you've found out," he said quickly, "you won't be doing it any more—huh? How about promising Mom and me this time—a real promise?"

From this minute on, she thought to herself, Dad and I are going to be *different*. And a quick, sharp stab, acutely physical, went through her heart.

She told him, her voice trembling: "No, Dad, I'm not going to promise! Because I am going to drink from now on when I feel like it!"

She thought: He's known. He's understood this is the start.

"You said—it was pretending—you said you hated it."

"But I feel different about it now! It isn't pretending—it just brings out the truth—whatever's really in you! Didn't you ever hear of 'In vino veritas'? Well, that's true—up to a certain point, if you don't get drunk! If you're happy being with a person it makes you happier—if you like them it makes you like them more. And if you're decent it makes you decenter! It just brings out the best in you, Dad, if there really is good in you—and Dickie and I are decent—we just have such fun being alive."

She told him then, her voice catching suddenly: "Oh, if you had just let me go—to New York—like I begged you—I'd be working now—and really happy. I'd have what I want—more than anything in the world—and I'd be satisfied. I wouldn't ever have started—anything like this, then. But I just couldn't stand being lonely any more!"

He said: "Couldn't you have gone out among 'em and had a good time without——"

"Oh, that's what you don't understand—not the good time I wanted—not with *who* I wanted——"

"You said you hated girls that bought popularity with this sort of thing."

"I did," she said, keeping her defiant eyes anywhere but where they must meet the stricken, beseeching ones before her. "But I guess I didn't understand—nobody that I liked a whole lot hung in the balance then like now."

"Is he worth it if it takes this sort of thing to get him?"

She said, her nostrils flickering: "Oh, you don't understand anything about it, Dad."

"Can't you explain?"—so hopefully.

And meeting his bewildered, grieving eyes for an unguarded instant with her own, she knew in a swift, clear flash: He's afraid! He's afraid! All through his career he's known how to be stern with his men and keep their respect and love. Yet me,

his only daughter—oh, this is the only fear he's ever felt in his whole life: *that he'll lose my love!*

"You wouldn't understand," she said gently, answering his question.

After a moment she said uncertainly, not very happily: "Well—I guess there isn't anything else to say——"

And went quietly out.

WATCHING out her window, trying to still her impatient eager heart, she heard Mom come in.

"I suppose you're going out with that boy again! To get drunk! I might have known—Saturday!"

"Oh, Mom, I don't feel like fighting now."

"Just utterly shameless! You don't care how coarse and common and vile you make yourself before the whole post! Getting *drunk*! Just like a cheap vulgar woman of the streets!"

"We don't stay on the post to get tight—you know we go to Huffolk! And, anyway, you know nice girls do drink nowadays."

"I suppose you want people to talk about you as they do about Barbie!"

"How can they, if we don't stay on the post? I told you that's why we go to Huffolk!"

"Hmph—I suppose you think people don't know! I suppose you think the boys don't know who Dickie's out with. What do you suppose they think and say about you—what do you suppose Dickie thinks of you himself? Do you suppose any man would ask a girl to marry him that goes out and gets drunk with him like a common creature that he could pick up in the streets?"

"Oh, Mom—they don't look at it like that any more. They want someone who can drink decently and be a pal and play the way they do!"

"Decently! Poor sweet Tommy—how do you suppose he'd feel if he knew? Do you think for a minute he'd want to marry you still?"

"Yes, he would! But if he didn't he wouldn't have to! I don't want to get married for a long time yet, anyway—I want to have a little fun first!"

"Yes—hmph! You keep on having this kind of fun, and the first thing you know you'll be having to get married!"

She wheeled from the window, catching her scarf from the bed. "Look out, Mom, I've got to go!"

"Oh, he's coming, I suppose. What time are you planning to get back?"

"Why, we'll catch the last ferry, as we always do! Get out of my way, Mom!"

"Well, I don't see why you can't stay on this side!"

"Then you'd kick worse if we stayed where people would see us!"

"Well, you'll miss the last boat, and then they *will* have something to talk about!"

"We won't, because we take Dickie's alarm clock and hang it on the dash——"

"Where? Where do you go? Why do you have to be waked up? What——"

"Oh, Mom, we go to the Huffolk Country Club and park outside!"

"I thought you didn't go where people could see you!"

"We *don't*, I tell you—I say we park outside and listen to the music!"

Ford horn blowing. Ford door slamming then, and little battered roadster rolling off down Waterfront Row. Little battered roadster standing for peace and understanding comradeship.

Road to the ferry. Southern March, and dogwood and Scotch broom.

"Damn it, kid, forget about Mom. We can't let her spoil our date!"

"Oh, I know—I'll be all right after a shot or two."

"Here's a good place—anything coming in back?"

"No."

Bottle of white liquor wrapped in her scarf.

"Tip her up, kid!"

Driving on, Dickie singing; the glad night begun.

"How do you feel, kid—huh?"

"Better!"

"'Atagirl! Got baby all wrapped up safe and sound?"

"Sure."

Dickie's arm around her, both of them singing.

'For I—love—you—
My lit—tle gyp—sy sweetheart——'

"Want another before we get to the boat?"

"All right."

"Take a good one!"

Rattling ahead again; past the sweet-potato fields.

"How do you feel now, huh?"

"Oh, I'm starting to want to grin at everybody!"

"Sittin' on the world?"

"Gosh, yes!"

§ 2

"ORDERS are out," Dad said.

"Oh, where does——"

"Dickie goes to Bancroft."

"Where's that?"

"Fort H. T. Bancroft—New Jersey. Right near New York."

Mom wailed: "Oh, good heavens, I was praying he'd get the Philippines!"

He came over in the afternoon. "Hot dog! Going to Bancroft, kid!"

"I know—Dad said. I'm glad you like it."

"Well, I was so damn scared of foreign service."

Riding beside him in the battered Ford up the beach road, she felt a queer depression.

"Damn it, though," he said, "I did kind of want to stick around Jonathan Wayde."

§ 3

ANOTHER Saturday; and the sweet weary minors of "Song of India" singing the beauty and sadness of the night.

She murmured: "I wanted it to be something typical—something that'd last a long time and always remind you of—our Saturdays."

A little hammered silver flask for his birthday, a month ahead of her own.

"It's that, Jan, sure enough," he told her huskily. "Damn if it isn't. But I'd never forget 'em anyhow, kid."

She lay still, curled against his breast in the Ford's seat.

"Jan—" he said then, clearing his throat—"I've been thinking something over lately—yes, sir, I've been thinking it over a lot. Damn it though—I don't know whether it'd spoil things or not."

She thought, with a little rushing sense of sadness, disappointment: It's been so perfect just this way.

Her other thought, that she shook away as quickly as she became aware of it, was: Now I can say *I told you so* to Mom.

"I don't know whether to spring it or not," he was saying. "By gosh, it's been so perfect just as it is—it might change things. But then again, if it didn't—if things could go on like this forever—and by gosh, I believe they could!"

"What?" she asked softly, watching his earnestness in the dark.

"Well, I'll tell you, kid—" he drew a deep breath—"I'd kind of like to take you up to Bancroft with me!"

She lay very still against his breast, and neither spoke for a little while. Then: "Do you love me?" she asked, thinking at the same moment: Oh, that's not fair.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said, holding her away to face her squarely. "I'll tell you how it is, Jan. Honest to gosh, I don't know whether I do or not—but if I don't, why what I do feel is such a damn good substitute I'm not so sure it isn't even better!"

She waited for him to go on, and he said: "You know, kid, you and I have talked marriage over before—we've seen it work out with our friends—all regular stereotyped marriages—fall in love, get hooked, have kids, slide into a humdrum existence, and get old and fat and forget there ever was any kick in life. Now, by gosh, the trouble with that kind is, when you get over being in love you haven't got anything else to fall back on. And that's just the point with us—we've got a hell of a firm foundation of friendship and congeniality to start with—no kiddin', ol'-timer, I don't see why the heck we couldn't get along swell! Sort of revolutionize marriage—run it on a brand-new basis——"

She lay so still that he thought she had fallen asleep and shook her lightly.

"What do you say, kid—huh?"

She asked him a question then, looking up at him through the dark.

"What do you mean?" he said. "You mean—did I ever go the limit—with a woman?"

She whispered: "Yes."

"No, by God! I didn't! I don't know—" he said—"maybe I'm a little old-fashioned or something, but I've always kind of had the idea a fellow hadn't ought to be any different from what he expects his wife to be. And, by gosh, I've lived so I could go to her just the same as she came to me! Honest to God!"

She laid her cheek against his breast again, sighing.

Singing of beauty and sorrow, "Song of India" played on.

After a while she stirred, murmuring: "You know—I'm supposed to be—engaged."

He said in a strained voice: "Are you in love with him?"

She fought hard against the living present to remember Tommy. Finally she said, sighing again: "No. No, I don't think I am. I think I was, but—it seems I've—forgotten him now."

After another moment she said: "I'd never be happy with him anyway. I know that now. Not since I've gotten to like my liquor."

"Well," he said, the strain going out of his voice, "I've told you the way I feel about things, kid. How about it, huh?"

She said: "Oh, there's lots of time—over two months—let's wait and see how we feel then. Anyway, we're tight now—you see how *you* feel to-morrow when you're cold sober."

She was so tired that once inside the front door she had sobbed a little, climbing the stairs.

"Where have you been?"

Mom standing in her nightgown at the top of the stairs was a ghost in the unreal gray morning light.

"Oh, Mom—I'll tell you what happened to-morrow—I want to get to bed——"

"The *idea* of coming home at 5 A. M.! The *idea*! Look at you

reel! Drunk again! Janet Custis, how *dare* you come back to your parents' house like this!"

"I'm *not* drunk, I'm just tired! Look out, Mom, please—please let me get to bed!"

"You tell me where you've been, Janet Custis!"

"To Huffolck—I told you—Mom, oh, please, please——"

"Where have you been since the ferry got in?"

She fell across her bed, sobbing into her pillow. "We've been coming home ever since! We had two blowouts coming through Calhoun—a bottle in the street got our tires front and back! We put on the spare and ran on it and one rim—back to the garage at the bend—but we couldn't get anybody up! So we parked the Liz and waited for a lift—but it was so late nobody came, so finally—we started walking—and we had to walk all the way—and I'm so tired I'm crazy—now get *out* and let me go to bed!"

"Do you think I'm stupid? Blowouts—you know you're lying!"

"I'm not—I'm not—that's the truth——"

Mom's hands in her tangled curls, yanking her to her knees on the floor. She screamed: "*Stop*, damn it—*let go—let go!*"

"I'll *teach* you to curse and lie and deceive and disgrace your father's and mother's good name and have no shame for yourself!"

Dad standing in the doorway in his bathrobe, blinking at them. "What's all the rumpus about, huh?"

She fell back against her bed screaming at them both: "Damn it, I won't *stand* this any more! Dickie asked me to marry him to-night, and I'm going to! I'll clear out to-morrow, and just try and make me ever come back!"

The door locked then, Mom crying on the other side of it. She lay across her bed screaming still, hitting Dad's hands away.

"No, I don't *want* to talk about it—I'm through! I wouldn't stick around here if it was the only place in the world I had to go! But it isn't, and I'm going as far away as I can get and never come back! *You* don't give a damn about me either—you won't do anything to make me happy—you wouldn't let me go to New York!"

"Aw, Jan——"

"Get out! Get out, I say!"

Alone finally, she lay sobbing while the sun came up. Across the hall low voices droned, rising and hushing. She fell asleep with her clothes on, while day spread over the post.

A battleship was drifting past the signal tower, a white figure with two red and white flags busy on its forward deck.

Dad said, squinting into the sunlight: "Mom and I talked things over last night after you went to bed. She's sorry for the way she did."

He peered around at the swing and saw the bitter sullenness in her face.

Watching the white figure and the flags again, he said: "Don't think you could make up with her now if she said she was sorry?"

"I'll tell her good-bye before I go."

His green eyeshade was sticking out of his breeches pocket. He put it on to watch the battleship better. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "Go live with Dickie up at the bachelor quarters? Afraid you won't be able to get quarters for the little time before he goes."

"Frances would let me stay there."

She knew in that moment, looking into her heart for the first time since her blind decision: I'm not ready to be married yet.

But she told him bitterly: "I might just as well get married—you won't let me ever make anything of myself like I want to. I might just as well be married and forget all about any ambition I ever had!"

Up on the signal tower red and white flags were waving back; she tried to read them, catching a word here and there, not paying any attention to what they meant.

Dad said in a quickened tone: "Mom's got an idea." He took his pipe from his pocket and filled it slowly, frowning at it. "She says—if you wanted to come along and go to Europe with her, you could study over there."

"To *Europe*?"

"Yes—seems she's made up her mind to go pretty soon—this summer, maybe—thinks she's got enough saved up now to go over and spend a while taking in the sights. Guess she's got her

mind set on Paris mostly. Ought to be able to find some pretty good designing schools there."

"But—but I thought she was saving up to go—for you and her to go, after you retire!"

He lit his pipe, drawing on it in long breaths that made deep hollows in his lean dark cheeks.

"Well—guess that was the original idea. But lately seems she's been changing her mind. She's decided she wants to take in Paris herself now—then maybe we'll work it to go over again when we retire—that's a long time off yet."

She said, scoffing: "I know! What's the sense of trying to kid me? She changed her mind just last night—to get me away from Dickie!"

"Well—I guess it did kinda start her imagination to working when you sprang it on her about going to beat it off and get married right away."

She lay back in the swing, her heart beating faster, staring sullenly out at the flags flickering again now on the battleship's deck.

"Well, it's a dumb idea," she said. "How does she think we'd ever get along in Europe—any better than we do here? Didn't she think about that? And when we did fight, so far away, I'd be in a fine fix! She'd have me just where she wants me, all right—where I wouldn't have a chance of getting away!"

"Well, she's promised to be reasonable. We talked about that, and she—she's pretty reasonable now—guess you scared her up good and plenty. She'd behave herself, I think, all right. And you'd be working hard and letting the hooch alone and not doing anything to get her upset."

After a few minutes he looked at his watch. "Well, I better be getting down to the office a while before lunch. Having some writs to-morrow."

She lay alone on the porch, arms under her head, her heart beating furiously in galloping exultant confusion.

BARBIE was in love.

Kicking the little flat heels of her black and white sport shoes against the railing of her porch, she told Janet all about it.

"We're going to be married just as soon as school's out. Golly, Jan, can you imagine me married?"

"Aren't you afraid it'll cramp your style?"

"I don't care!" Barbie was a transformed Barbie. "I just want my Juddy!"

"Well, I wish I knew what I wanted—what I was going to do."

"Why, I thought you were going to Europe!"

"Oh, I don't know. Mom and I keep fighting so—oh, gosh, I'd like to be a million miles from everywhere, so I could be free!"

"You'd better get married. You'd be free then."

"I know—that's what I keep thinking. And sometimes that seems the only thing to do—times when I *know* I never could stand it with Mom long enough to finish a course. After I got through studying and could earn my own living, then I'd be free. But sometimes it seems I can't wait that long—I want to be free now. And Dickie keeps on begging so and reasoning so. Damn it—I didn't want my marriage to be a reasoning matter!"

"Oh, well, this is a hard-boiled age."

"I know. But then I remember Tommy again, right out of a clear sky. And I get to thinking it would have been different with him."

"Well, good gosh, if you still feel that way about him you better go on and take a chance on Europe and wait for him."

"I know, but gosh, there're a thousand things to think about. I like Dickie so much—we've got ten times as much in common as Tommy and me. Imagine taking a drink with Tommy! And there's no getting around it—I sure have gotten to like my liquor."

"I guess you better marry Dickie," Barbie sighed.

"That's what I decide, too, when I look at that side of it. Maybe I'd never miss Europe and studying—with Dickie. When he says, 'Life'd be one great big long Saturday night, kid!'—oh, gee, if it *could*——"

§ 2

THE subject of Dickie was the favorite meal-time topic now at the white-pillared house.

"I *would* give up my career for the glory of scrubbing a kitchen floor on my hands and knees and darning my husband's socks!"

"Isn't Dickie kinda in debt on his uniforms?" Dad would probe gently.

"Oh, sure, some. But he's going to sell the flivver."

"Hmph. He certainly won't get back one third of what he put into it, the condition he's got it in. The *idea*, anyway, of debating the matter! Good heavens, you are the queerest girl! Quarrel and fuss and fret and fume for a year over going away to study, and now when we lay your very wish at your feet—spurn it! And Europe—Paris, of all places! As if there were any comparison between the designing schools of New York and Paris!"

"Why can't I get married and go to Europe too?"

"Hmph. Wouldn't that be lovely—to have a little Dickie to cart around Europe! And besides—your father and I *should* be expected to go to the expense of educating you for the benefit of that irresponsible spendthrift of a boy! If it were poor sweet Tommy it were going to benefit, I wouldn't mind so much."

"Well, you keep telling me how broke we're going to be—I should think you'd want to give me a chance to make a little extra money for my own sake."

"And what would you do with it? Get drunk with it!"

"Oh, well, maybe I'll elope."

"Hmph. You'll have a hard time getting a license without your parents' consent. If I'd known about state laws before, I wouldn't have gotten so wrought up over your original blustering."

§ 3

AT EASTER Barbie was married, not waiting for the end of school. Janet went to see her, just back from her brief honeymoon, in her tiny apartment in one of the yellow brick buildings across the new paved street from the old yellow frame house; and watching Barbie's too-painted, almost peaked little face in the dim rose glow of a boudoir lamp, found herself bewildered at its transfiguration of new radiant beauty.

"Oh, Jan, I can't *tell* you how marvelous it is to be married—I don't know why anyone stays single! Jan, you've simply got to do it too, ol' girl!"

"I don't know yet what I'm going to do," she said.

"When I hear him coming up the stairs in the hall I just thrill so I almost die! My Juddy—oh, he's so *darling*, Jan!"

More confused than ever, Janet dropped in to see Frances. Frances was putting a patch on Donny's play pants.

"Hello, kid dear. Where on earth have you been hiding yourself? I'm terribly behind times on you."

She sat on a hassock at Frances's feet. "Oh, I've been in such crazy moods I didn't want to bother anybody. I—I'm thinking about getting married, Frances."

"Married? When? To whom?"

"Dickie."

"Dickie? Heavens, Jan—when?"

"Well, pretty soon—before he leaves. That is, it's either go to Europe with Mom or get married and stay home."

She outlined the facts of the case.

"Jan—you almost incomprehensible kid—you aren't going to give up—that?"

"But, Frances, suppose we fought all the time? I couldn't stand it—how could I study?"

"But, darling girl, you've *got* to put up with—whatever you have to put up with! Oh, Jan, if she's really willing to take you to *Paris*—you mustn't let such a chance slip by. Why, you might be sorry the rest of your life!"

"But I might be sorry the rest of my life if I lost Dickie!"

Such a queer desperate look in Frances's amber eyes. "Are you so in love with him now, Jan?"

She tried to explain: ". . . and I just like him and respect him more than any other man on earth, and I know if I go away from him now I'd never marry him, because I know *me*."

Frances said in a shaken voice: "Oh, Jan, you've got to make *sure* then which is the thing you won't regret—dear kid, you *must* not wreck your whole life. This is the crossroads point—you may look back from all the years ahead and wish you'd done the other thing."

After a few moments Frances said: "Where does that lovely kaydet child come in now? Have you really forgotten him so completely?"

"Yes," she said. "Except—just sometimes. But I know now I'd never be happy with Tommy anyway."

"His letters are so—awful, now," she said then. "I hate to get them. In his last one he said: 'God, Jannie, if you didn't love me any more, I'd just plain want to die.'"

"Oh, Jan."

"But I didn't really promise him anything, Frances. I think I knew even then, when I thought I did love him, how changeable I am. I generally do seem to know myself pretty well, Frances."

"You're fortunate, dear." Again that note of desperate sadness, tinged now with bitterness.

§ 4

SHE cried, facing him fiercely: "Dad—once when Dickie and I were just little kids people talked about us—d'you remember? They talked about us because we rode through the woods! And I was crying, because I didn't know what they meant, and you took me away from Mom and tried to explain—and you said—do you remember what you said?—you said, 'Don't pay any attention to them—just go right on riding through the woods!'"

"That was different, Jan——"

"No, it wasn't! It was just the same! And I'm not going to

pay any attention to them now either! I don't *care* what they say, so long as I know I'm all right!"

Driving up the beach road in the Ford, Dickie said: "Well, I'll tell you, kid—I don't want to be the cause of people talking about you. If our parties are making 'em do that, the way your dad says, why I'm for swearing off."

"So you're just as bad as the rest! People will say things! If I don't care, why should you? If it's me they're talking about, then I'm the one to say 'yes' or 'no'! And I say 'no'; I'm not going to quit!"

"No kiddin', has the stuff got you like that?"

"Oh, it isn't that. It's just—oh, Dickie, I tell you, I *am* going to live my own life!"

"Listen, kid," Dickie said, "come along up to Bancroft with me and you can live your own life to your heart's content."

Her arms flung out in a forlorn gesture. "I can't—I can't—I've got to go to Europe with Mom! I know I've got to, no matter how we fight or how impossible it seems now! If I threw over this one chance to learn how to earn my own money I'd never forgive myself—I might even blame you!"

They fell silent, brooding unhappily.

"I'll tell you what, kid," Dickie said then. "Let's skip off over the state line and get hooked and not tell anybody. Then you—you go on to Europe and study. And then come on back to me when you get through."

"But—but——"

"That's all, kid. That's all I want—just the knowledge I'll have you for sure, some time. Just some sort of security—so as not to lose you for good."

"Just—just——"

"Sure. Just the ceremony. We've talked that over anyway and decided we're not ready for any more, yet a while. So this way would be the solution—make us sure not to lose each other, and still give us a year more to play around in and be more ready for marriage at the finish of it. And give me a chance to get my damn debts paid off too, and some cash ahead. See, kid?"

At the road's end by the balloon shed he let the Ford roll to a stop under the pines.

"It'd be fooling Mom. It wouldn't be playing square."

"Damn it, she doesn't play square with you! Why shouldn't she take you and let you get married too? She's said you could marry me when you came back if you still wanted to, so what the hell? You said she said she'd take you anyway if it was Burke still instead of me! Damn it, what's the matter with me? And her principal objection anyway was about maybe having a little Dickie to cart around Europe. Well, there wouldn't be any risk of that this way!"

"Oh, I know—I know!"

"But it's up to you, kid," he said. "Whatever you want to do—by gosh, I'll wait till you get back and be true to you—but I know, damn it, it means maybe losing you."

"Oh, it would make me work hard, if I knew it was part way for you too—for *sure*—that whatever I was making myself able to earn would be for *us*, the same as your pay. And then when Mom and I fought, if it got too bad and I couldn't stand it, why I could just say, 'Well, so long, Mom, I'm going back to my husband!'—couldn't I?"

"You're darn tootin' you could, ol'-timer! How about it, huh? You just say the word!"

She said against his shoulder: "Oh, I couldn't decide now—I'd have to think it over—I'd have to be *sure* . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

STEVE was to leave during the last of June with the Coast Artillery Rifle Team, to be gone all summer.

Of late he had held unwontedly aloof, appearing to watch from a distance the development of her affair and the tightening of the meshes of the situation into which her defiance of post gossip had thrown her.

Once, upon the occasion of a chance meeting on the steps of the Post Exchange, he had said with a flash of the old drawn pitifulness of expression:

"Oh, Jan, let me take you away from it all, honey. I cain't stand to see you so unhappy. If you'd only marry me—all I'd ask is just the right to take care of you, dear——"

"I don't get you, Steve," she had said, not meaning to be facetious.

"Just the ceremony, Jan—word of honor——"

"Oh, Steve," she had scoffed, "*you!*"

She had told him then, swearing him to secrecy, that she might possibly elope with Dickie before going to Europe with Mom.

"Do you love him?" he had questioned dully.

"Well," she had smiled, "not enough for it to do you any good to tear him away from me."

"Then why do you marry him, Jan?" he had pleaded, ignoring her thrust.

"I didn't say I was going to, for sure," she said. "But if you feel that way about it, why keep on begging me to marry you? I certainly love Dickie more than you, anyhow."

Hearing things like that shouldn't affect him any more, she thought. Gosh, I don't believe he'll really all the way give up till he sees me with a wedding ring on my finger.

Two days before Steve was to leave he asked for a good-bye date—" . . . the last favor I'll ever ask of you, Jan."

It was Saturday—Dickie's last.

Janet said to Dickie: "After all I've hurt him it's the least I can do for him. I'll just let him take me for a ride and be back early, and we can go to Hufolk just the same."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Steve came for her in his roadster early in the afternoon; earlier than she had expected. Feeling a little pang at the utter bliss of his face as he crawled in beside her, she resolved: I'm going to be nice to him, no matter what.

"Know where we're going?" he said as they started off. "To Yorkville! We've never been there together, and I've got a whole fried chicken along for dinner on the road."

Yorkville—thirty miles away.

"Oh, Steve, that'll take so long—I've got a date——"

The wounded disappointment striking the happiness from his face caught her up short.

"Well, go on driving," she said.

He was very gay then. And speeding along cement winding through pines, laughing with the old-time Steve, she didn't realize how many tumble-down darky shanties had flitted past until they were drawing up facing the old red side-wheeler at Jefferson Court House.

"The boat's in, honey, all ready to go!" He was begging so.

It was early still; the afternoon bright.

"Oh, all right. But not far on the other side."

Half an hour later they were bumping over the cobbles of Yorkville, striking for the open country beyond the town.

The sun was going down when they ate supper on a pleasant dirt road under a dipping pine bough.

"As soon as we finish we'll have to go back."

"All right, honey, in just a little while."

They divided the last piece of chicken between them.

"Jan—" Steve said—"I know you've been drinking a heap lately."

"Well?"

"It's all right, honey—God knows, anything you do is all right. Only—I cain't help remembering how you made me promise once to cut it out. You're changing a heap, honey, and it hurts to see you—but I just know so well that if you weren't

here with me you'd be some place drinking with *him*—and I thought—” he was reaching into a separate compartment of the lunch basket he had bought for the occasion—“I thought maybe it might make you have a better time with old dull me, if——”

She felt a strange slight shock as his hand laid its offering shyly on her knees. To drink with anyone else but Dickie . . .

“It'd make me so happy, Jan, if you'd drink with me—just a little—before I go away.”

Oh, well, she thought swiftly, I'll just get a little bit of a start on him, by the time I meet him. She took the quart vinegar bottle from him and tipped it to her lips.

They had started up again and gone swinging around unbanked corners, stopping now and then for another drink. They had fallen to singing together then: West Point and Coast Artillery ditties, adapted to harmony, until, unthinking, Janet had swung into:

“*Mademoiselle from Armentières—par—lez-vous——*”

And Steve had lurched the car to a stop and curled his long legs up over the door and cried in her lap.

How long they stayed that way, oblivious to shouts from passing cars, neither knew when they woke up at last to find it moonlessly dark and rain beating like little indefatigable hammers on the roadster's roof.

“Steve—Steve! Look—it's dark!”

He sat up. “My God, we passed plumb out!”

The bottle at their feet was empty. He threw it over the side into the woods.

“It's raining,” she shuddered. “Look what time it is, Steve.”

He pawed for his watch. “Nine-ten. Have to turn around—last ferry goes at ten.”

She remembered that she had been going to get home early; but she didn't remember why.

The roadster rolled back in a ditch, and the wheels kicked mud.

Steve mumbled: “Red clay—nasty stuff. Want another shot, honey, 'fore we get going?”

"Why, it's all gone."

He pulled a fresh flat white pint from the tool compartment. "Didn't know your capacity, honey—wanted you to have a good time."

"Thanks, Steve," she said, taking the bottle and on a sudden generous impulse offering her lips.

He caught her to him with a sob.

Piecing it together afterwards, she could recall nothing of the ride back to Yorkville but the beginning of it: the slurring forward into deep red ruts and a shout from a car coming from the opposite direction: "*Watch out up ahead, buddy!*"

The next thing she remembered was a breath, too hot, against her neck, and a hand inside the low V of her sweater burning the bare flesh of her breast.

Fighting back to consciousness, she had understood all at once, incredulously, and bracing herself, hands against Steve's chest, had dealt him an open-palmed blow across the face in the dark with all the hard-muscled strength of her small body, cringing him, whimpering, into a corner of the seat.

"Forgive me, Jan!" he was pleading then. "I forgot myself—I couldn't help myself! Oh, my God!"

"You start the car and get to that ferry!"

"It's gone, Jan! We got stuck in the mud—don't you remember?"

"The last ferry's gone?"

"Yes"—barely uttered.

She had thought, hard, hard; knowing definitely but a single thing. "You take me to phone Dad!"

"I cain't, Jan! We're stuck!"

"Well, what are you figuring on doing—staying here all night?"

"We'll have to wait till someone comes by!"

Her wits were returning, answering the hammering sense of emergency. Down the road she made out a blur of light.

"Go to that farmhouse and get some mules!"

"I cain't leave you here, Jan, alone!"

"You do like I say! Do you think *you're* protection?"

Whimpering, he stumbled out to the road.

"If anybody bothers you, Jan—here—my thirty-eight's in this side pocket—take it—keep it——"

He was off, slushing noisily through the red slime.

Over a telephone of a country store an hour later, she had called Fort Jonathan Wayde, cowering away from the ogling eyes outside the ramshackle booth.

Dad kept saying: "Wait a minute, Jan—" to answer Mom, yelling from upstairs. Finally she heard him shout: "Keep quiet, for God's sake!"—an oath that, from Dad, went through her like a swift cold blade.

"Jan," he said steadily then, "listen. Go to a hotel—can you hear? And have Steve go to the other one. Don't have him go in with you at all. And catch the first ferry home in the morning."

"Yes, Dad," she had choked, clinging, hanging, to the mouth-piece's neck. "Oh, Dad—I'm so *damn* sorry——"

His voice had come back to her over the distance: "That's all right, Chick. Accidents will happen."

They reached the white-pillared house the next morning at eight-thirty. Steve had cried over the steering wheel for almost the whole thirty miles from Jefferson Court House.

"Please, dear, forgive me, cain't you? I was so drunk—I didn't know what I was doing."

In the opposite corner, as far away from him as possible, she had stayed silent, but for three times.

Once she had said: "Oh, for the love of Mike, quit blubbering so!"

And again: "You've made me feel soiled. I'm not good enough for Dickie now."

Then, fiercely, at the curb of the white-pillared house, snatching her hand from his pale, suppliant lips: "I never want to see you again!"

Mom was waiting at the head of the stairs. Janet, lips apart for apologies, looking into her eyes, said instead: "Where's Dad?"

"Well," Mom said, "I suppose you're satisfied now that your shamelessness has disgraced us *all* beyond possible repair!"

Janet tried to push past; Mom jerked her back.

"Don't you touch me!" she screamed. "You keep your hands off me!" And she ran to Dad's door.

"You *knew* your father was going to Washington this morning," Mom said.

Feeling forlorn and lonely and near to tears, she turned to her own room; but her path was blocked.

"Janet Custis, you tell me what you mean by such outrageous behavior!"

"Oh, Mom, if you're accusing me again—oh, Mom, I can't stand this again—I didn't do anything!"

"No, it doesn't look that way! Staying out all night—coming home in the morning looking like *this*—riding brazenly home in broad daylight——"

"What else could I *do*? I had to get home!"

"The whole post will know! People are talking already! How will your poor father and I ever face the disgrace? Oh, I wish to the Lord you'd never been born!"

"I wish I hadn't too! Not to *you*, anyway! Oh, you've got no right to doubt me like this—you've always doubted me even when I was a little kid—with Dickie then—with Bud—with everybody since——"

" . . . sacrifices for you all your life—I've gone without new clothes myself so you could have them—I'd have worked my fingers to the *bone* for you if necessary——"

Wheeling, she ran to her room and turned the key and threw herself across her bed, shaken by frightful, bitter racking sobs.

§ 2

MOM's face was to the wall, and she was so still that only the quick pulse in her neck gave sign of life.

Frightened, Janet stood in the doorway. "Mom—what's the matter?"

Mom moved, and something happened to her drawn features at sight of her daughter in the threshold.

"Where on earth have you and Dickie *been*?"

"Oh, we were just—away. What's the matter?"

"What ever possessed you to go away for the entire day when I was sick?"

"I didn't know you were sick! I never had any idea you wouldn't be up this morning the same as always!"

"Where have you been?"

"We went to Sea View." They had—gone through there twice on the trolley car to and from the train.

"Janet, look me in the eye! You haven't got married, have you?"

"Oh, Mom—" this isn't a lie, God!—"you know Virginia laws won't let me get married! I wish you'd stop talking like that!"

"Well—you were gone so long. And I've been so miserable and needed you so. The doctor's been here three times."

"What's the *matter*, Mom?"

"He says if I don't stop worrying I'll be very seriously, *dangerously* ill. He says my nervous system can't stand the strain. How *can* I stop worrying when you act as you do? You're just driving me right straight into my grave!" Crying by this time: little pitiful sniffly whimpers into the pillow.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to take care of you, Mom! I didn't know you were sick!"

"Such a thoughtless girl! Just wrapped up in yourself! It wouldn't matter to you if I *should* die!"

Out on the porch she said softly: "Mom's sick. I guess you better go on home."

"Is she? That's too bad. Gosh, kid—time's getting so damn short."

"I know it. Why couldn't you wait till to-morrow to go?"

"I've been thinking about it. I could make it still, with good train connections. D'you want me to stay over, huh—no kid-din'?"

"You know I do. Then we could have another date to-night."

He put his hands on her shoulders.

"My wife! Hot damn!"

"Sh-h-h——"

He whispered: "How does it feel to be married, kid?"

"Not so very different. How does it to you?"

"Just makes me feel like I've got a hell of a lot to work for!"

"I know. That's how it's going to be with me too."

They stood looking into each other's eyes.

"Sure you're not sorry, Jan?"

"Oh, no—I'm glad! Because I just *can't* fail in Europe now!"

Mom was better after dinner. But she had been very ill during the rest of the afternoon. Once she had been hysterical, and another time, when she had got up and gone alone for a drink of water, she had come near fainting, and it had taken both Janet and Ollie the maid to get her back into bed.

At eight-thirty there was a noise in the downstairs hall. Janet slipped away to meet Dickie.

It was Steve—a little bit drunk.

"What do you want? I told you never to come here again!"

"I know it, Jan," he said. "I cain't help it—I had to see you just once more before I leave."

She marched past him to the front door; pushed it wide. "Get out!"

"Please, honey—just five minutes. I'll go then—word of honor!"

"What's *that* worth?"

His hand went trembling up across his eyes. "My God—you used to trust me——"

"Oh, quit being dramatic. *Get out*, I said!"

She stepped onto the porch, and he followed, whimpering.

"What have I done, Jan, that you don't trust me any more?"

She flung furiously: "If you don't know, you're a worse fool than I thought you were!"

"But I was so drunk, dear—I didn't know what I was doing."

"Anybody else would have known! Anybody decent—*anybody* besides you! Do you suppose Dickie—oh, you've made me feel rotten compared to him! I couldn't even tell him before——"

"Before what?" he gasped. "Before *what*, Jan?" Then: "Jan, you married him to-day!"

"What makes you think that?" she challenged desperately, feeling the fierce leap and pound of her heart in her throat. She put her hand up to still it.

"You did, I *know* you did! You were gone with him all day

—somebody saw you take the Sea View boat early this morning! And you didn't get back till late, because I've been calling up all afternoon! You did marry him, Jan—'fess up! Oh, my God, I know you did!"

The heart that had been pounding in terror was suddenly angry instead; recklessly, blindly angry. "All right then, yes, I did! I've been married to Dickie since noon to-day. *Now* I hope you'll know when you're licked and clear out and never bother me again!"

His face, in its pallor, had gone so absurdly blank of every vestige of expression that the shock of the sight of it steadied her. She thought, terrified for a moment: He's going crazy—right here!

But he didn't go crazy. Instead, shrugging, he said in the calmest, most controlled voice she had ever heard from him:

"Well, maybe I have lost. But I'm not licked—not quite. You've ruined my life—maybe I can ruin yours a little bit. Maybe I can't tear him away from you—maybe you don't love him enough to make that do any good. But I can do something else instead. I know what you're figuring on doing—and I can send you up yonder with him to live with him before you're ready to."

She gasped the one thought springing uppermost in her mind. "My trip——"

"Yes—I'll be able to remember I took that away from you, at least."

She struggled against the welling angry futile tears. A dozen retorts, defiances, pleas, suggested themselves. *And he claims to have loved me!* she thought bitterly. And then: He does. If I should stoop to remind him—to plead with him—why, one word of mine of that sort would drop him right onto his knees, crying!

But: "I'll save you the trouble of telling Mom," she said. "I'll tell her myself."

"I'll go along with you," he shrugged.

Mom was propped up on her pillows when they came into her room together.

"Why, hello, Steve. Aren't you *ashamed* to show your face around here after compromising my only daughter before the whole post!"

"I'm sorry, Mom," Steve shrugged. "I tried to get her back."

"I know you did," Mom said. "You always have been conscientious, Steve—much more so than *some* of her choice friends. But it did upset me terribly, right on top of the way she's been carrying on for so long. She's been a very sweet girl, though, since she got in this afternoon. She's been taking such good care of me—haven't you, angel child? I believe she does love her mother a little bit after all. What's the matter—have you two been quarreling again?"

Mom had seen the look that Janet, drawing something from the V of her dress, threw Steve.

"Mom," Janet said, stepping toward the bed, "this is going to be awfully unpleasant——"

"Why, what on earth——" The peace had left Mom's face.

She unfolded the small paper that Janet had given her; ran a glance down its length.

"I thought so," she said, very quietly. "I told your father when he left."

Janet's eyes sent Steve tiptoeing from the room. She followed downstairs. "Now get out!" she said at the front door.

When she went back upstairs Mom had fainted, half fallen out of bed.

That night Janet and Dickie carried all the medicine bottles marked poison and all the antique Philippine knives out onto the porch beside the swing. Once Janet, by sheer superior strength, had taken a bottle of iodine away from Mom.

Twice more Mom fainted, wandering through the house, upstairs and down, as though searching for something.

Once, in her kimono, she went out the front door and got into the Buick, parked at the curb, and after Janet coaxed her back into the house Dickie unscrewed a carburetor connection in case she should try again.

She did try again, and finding that the engine wouldn't start, climbed out and went wandering down the back road, stopping every few steps to look into the moat, until Janet, trailing along

behind, pleading with her, had persuaded her at length back home.

It was just a little while after that that Janet ran out onto the porch again and curled up in the swing, head on Dickie's knees, sobbing: "She's got all my baby pictures spread out on the bed, and she's talking to them and singing to them!"

In the morning Mom was all right: content to stay in bed, at any rate. Annulment was not mentioned; nor was Europe. Mom spoke very little, turning her face to the wall whenever Janet appeared in the doorway.

Once she said: "You've made your bed. Now you can lie in it."

Janet wanted to stay at Jonathan Wayde until Mom should be entirely well, or at least until Dad should return. But Mom would only shake her head, face turned to the wall. She seemed all at once to want Janet away.

The night before, out on the porch, Dickie had said: "I'll do my damndest, ol'-timer, to keep you from ever being sorry it turned out like this."

And facing him, Janet had answered: "I will be sorry—a little. But I'll play the game the best and squarest I know how—I swear."

Then Dickie, holding her away from him, just looking at her, had said: "Damn it, I love you more already, kid!"

Mom stayed in her room with the door shut while Janet packed her trunk with the supervision of Ollie and Dorcas.

"Miss Janet, don' yo' go runklin' up yo' nice dresses in a hunk like dat!" Dorcas took her to task. "Dat ain' no way how to pack away clo'es!"

"I never packed alone in my life before," she said. "Mom was always at school to do it for me—except once, and then my roommate did."

At six-thirty Dickie stood in the downstairs hall, calling. "Hurry up, kid—got twenty minutes."

Two bulging suitcases in her hands, she paused at a closed door; set down her suitcases, and pushed it lightly open.

"Mom—" she said softly—"I'm going now."

Then after a moment: "Mom—aren't you even going to tell me good-bye?"

She backed out, pulling the door quickly to and groping for her suitcases.

Dickie heard her bumping them against the wall and ran up to take them. She followed him down the stairs and out the front door and down the walk.

The old homestead, she thought; curiously, for she had never thought of it as that before. *God, don't let me look back!*

Barbie and her husband were at the dock. Frances was not there. There was very little time.

Barbie hurried her over to a corner by the baggage room. "Jan, I've got to tell you. Promise you won't breathe a single word——"

"What?" she said, startled by Barbie's eyes.

"I'm pregnant."

"Barbie! No! Oh, why—why, you said——"

"I know. I guess I must have been then—right at the very minute I was telling you all that stuff."

"Oh, Barbie—gosh! What are you going to do?"

"Do? Have it, of course. Oh, golly, Jan, I'm scared pie-eyed—and I don't *want* it—and I—I *seem to hate* Juddy!"

Dickie was shouting frantically: "Hey, Jan—for God's sake—the last whistle——"

"Well, ol' girl—" Barbie's little vivid lips lifted for a good-bye kiss; the first kiss ever exchanged between them—"I hope you'll be just awfully damn happy as hell. . . ."

Across the beach the pink white-pillared houses of Water-front Row were flattening perspectiveless against the green of the ramparts and the bright blue of the moat. Swift invisible brushes were coloring the western sky. In the elbow crook of the parapet above the postern gate the barest glimpse of a red brick chimney bobbed with the choppy lap of the water; the old yellow frame house a-tiptoe in farewell.

THE mail man was coming at last, and she sprang up from the steps and ran to meet him, and he touched the crooked brim of his campaign hat and handed her one letter, and she wheeled, tearing at its flap, and ran back to the big shabby house at the end of the row.

She went up the faded, peeling steps in two leaps, and going up the flight inside sat down on a stair and hid her face in the pages clutched on her lap.

She heard a step above and looked up, sobbing. "Dickie, it is—it's from him at last—*it's all right!*"

He came down and lifted her up and led her on upstairs into a great bare room with just two bunks and a chest of drawers and a straight chair. She gave him her letter.

He lowered it finally and looked at her. "Gosh, I'm glad, Jan. No kiddin', if he hadn't come across just like this, I—I'd have felt like bumping myself off or something!"

"Oh, but I knew he would—when he could. You know how he gets—just so sort of hurt and silent—and can't talk——"

She fell to crying again, softly, on the foot of her bunk.

"Kid, for God's sake——"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dickie—excuse me—please——"

He came and sat beside her, patting her shoulders. "Gosh, Jan, I hate to see you so damn unhappy. Kid, I'd take you *back*—we'd go back to-morrow, Jan, honest—if that's——"

"Oh, no, no, Dickie—oh, I don't mean—oh, just don't pay any attention, please. I'll get over it—I'll be all right—it's only been a week still, remember."

"I know, but can't I do anything at all to make you happy?"

"Oh, just keep on being so—so good to me—and so patient——"

She cried on, trying hard to stop. He went and stood by the window, looking out at the bay.

"This is the first—I've cried, Dickie——"

"But you've wanted to, kid, lots of times. I've known that."

"I'm all right now," she said at last.

He came and sat beside her again, uncertain, miserable.

"Hold me," she said, reaching up her arms; and they lay down together on the bunk, her head pressed under his chin.

"Kid—if it's all wrong we'll go back. If we made a bum guess—you can go, I mean."

"Oh, but it isn't all wrong, Dickie. It's just a matter of getting used—it's just all so different."

"So different that maybe it's too much to ask of you, ol'-timer—too much to expect—when you don't even love me."

"But I *like* you so—I wouldn't want to be without you—oh, honest, that's the way I feel!"

"Sure, kid? Enough to go on—like this, huh?" His hand flung out at the empty room. "No furniture—no new dresses—no swell home like you've always had—no Mom and Dad—only me—and a bunch of dirty mangy-looking walls——"

"Well, it's our game. We started it ourselves, and no matter how it turns out, we can't be quitters."

"It'll mean some bad times, kid, till we get on our feet. All my damn debts——"

"But if we'd got married not planning on Europe at all, it'd have been like that. And that's what you meant first."

"I know, but I didn't realize—gosh, it didn't hit me at all what it all meant till we hit this damn post. I hadn't figured we'd draw a barn like this."

"But we'll get stuff for it, little by little."

"If we're here three years we won't have it filled yet. And God knows when they'll ever get the funds to paint and repair it—all of 'em are the same, and no signs of any appropriation in sight."

"But it's a place to live. And it isn't as if we didn't have any furniture at all. We've got chairs to sit in and tables to eat off and bunks to sleep on."

His cheek lay hard against her hair. "I don't want you to go back. I want to keep you, Jan—forever, maybe. But, by gosh, I just want to be sure you realize how it's going to be. And if it's not worth it—if you want to get out now while the getting's good—why, you go ahead, kid."

"I don't want to go. Not unless you want me to."

His hand held her face closer against him. "Jan—I asked you to be my wife—and when I asked you I wanted you to be, right then—as soon as you would. I only got the idea about Europe—for your sake. And I'm selfish enough now to be glad—damn glad—it turned out like this and you're with me now! But I feel like hell on your account, kid, and I'd make it up to you any way I could and always will, by gosh, if the chance ever comes. It's just—I keep wanting you to understand, kid, what you're in for."

They kissed lingeringly, unpassionately.

"I can't help but really love you—some time, Dickie."

"Gosh, kid, I hope so."

§ 2

HE CAME in the back door at noon, home from his company.

"Hey, for God's sake—what's all this?"

"We're going to start housekeeping," she said.

"Gosh a'mighty! Where'd you get all this stuff?"

"I took the P-Ex bus into Redfern."

"What'd you do—buy out Woolworth's, huh?"

"There's not a single thing we don't absolutely need. I made a list and then cut out a third of it. Look—here's the silver-ware!"

Two knives and two spoons and two tablespoons and three forks.

"The forks were three for a dime," she apologized.

"Kid—you could have got more."

"No, I couldn't! I figured up how we stand for the whole month, counting out what we allowed for the rugs! At least—I couldn't have got more as long as I got these—and I wanted them."

A pair of little blue tin candlesticks and matching candles.

"I thought they'd dress up *our* room, sort of—on the window sill."

They went into the bare living room, and she lay in his lap in a splintered chair with a sagging seat.

"Gosh, it's swell to come home and find you here, kid. I get

lonesome as hell for you at the company. Don't you get to feeling blue here, all alone all day?"

"Oh—the ladies drop in sometimes."

"Do they? Do you go to see 'em too?"

"Well—not yet."

"You'd ought to," he said. "You'd ought to return their calls—even the informal ones. We've got to be getting out and paying back all our calls pretty darn quick, or people'll think we don't know what we'd ought to do."

"Who's been dropping in?" he asked her then.

"Oh—I never remember their names."

"How the heck are you going to know who to go see, then? No kiddin', Jan, if you don't go see 'em when they come to see you they're going to get to thinking you're high-ranking, or something, and won't come to see you any more."

"Well, I wouldn't mind that."

"What's the matter—don't you find any of 'em you like? Any of the young ones?"

"There aren't so many young ones. Mrs. Chase is the youngest. I like her all right. We get along fine. But the rest—oh, they're nice, but we just don't seem to have anything in common. I'm not interested in the things they talk about—bridge and entertaining and—kids. And they—they gossip so. I hate that."

"Well, I guess that's the army. You knew that."

"I never had to listen to it before—like this."

"You were just a kid before."

"Well, it's rotten. They won't let *anybody* live his or her own life. One of them comes along and talks about somebody else and then that one comes and talks about *her*. They talk about each other's kids and servants and husbands and dresses and houses and household management and not entertaining right. Sometimes it's really mean, and sometimes it's just petty. But I hate it either way."

After a moment she said: "They've got a bridge club."

"Did they ask you to join it?"

"Yes. I'm glad I don't play."

"Maybe you'd ought to learn," he said.

"What for?"

"Well—all the rest of 'em play."

"Well, that doesn't mean I have to. Go and park once a week with a bunch of them and sit and listen to their rotten chatter! I know what bridge parties are—I've heard them, even if I haven't played!"

"The only thing is," he said after a moment, "it's something that's kind of in line of duty for you."

"We couldn't afford it, anyhow," she said at length. "Every so often I'd have to have them meet here, and provide refreshments."

"Well, it wouldn't be so often we couldn't manage to scrape together enough to put out a reasonable feed now and then. The way I look at it, kid, it's something that's going to be expected of you, just as checking over company accounts and sounding off on the parade ground is expected of me."

"Well, anyhow," she said after another silence, "I'm going to be too busy keeping this big house clean and learning how to cook to have time to learn anything else. I told them that."

"Are you honest to gosh going to have plenty to keep you busy?" he asked, forgetting about bridge. "No kiddin', I've been worrying—I don't like the idea of your not having your horse any more. There's not a decent saddle horse in the stable here. And no car—I kind of wish we hadn't sold the Liz."

"Dickie," she said, "you know what's going to be one of our worst expenses? Laundry."

"Sure, there's no post laundry."

"Well, I decided to-day—I'm going to do it myself."

"You're *what*?"

"I'm going to wash our things myself. There won't be so much."

"The hell you are! That's one thing, by God, you don't have to stoop to! My wife a washerwoman—not by a damn sight! We'll send our stuff to Redfern, and to hell with the expense!"

"But we could save maybe ten dollars a month——"

"I don't give a damn! What do you suppose people would say if they knew?"

"Dickie!"

"Well, by God—you're not going to wash my shirts!"

"Well, Dickie," she said, "I am."

He held her away from him, and they looked at each other, and then he pulled her to him, pressing her head down against his breast.

"Kid—my gosh, kid—how do you think I'm going to help loving you already—loving you to beat hell? Answer me that, will you?"

"I thought of something you could do too," she told him, struggling for breath. "The commissary has Bull Durham—seven cents a bag and papers free. You could roll your own."

He was laughing—a queer laugh that hardly sounded like a laugh at all.

"You win, kid. Order a dozen bags along with our first groceries!"

On the way out through the kitchen to the mess he picked up a large bristly object lying with the rest of the Woolworth wares on the splintered table.

"What's this for, huh? My shoes?"

"Oh," she said, "that's for scrubbing the kitchen floor."

§ 3

SHE met him at the kitchen door, wrapped in her coat.

"The grate's broken in the furnace. We can't have a fire till it's fixed. I've phoned the quartermaster's twice, but nobody's come yet."

"Gosh, kid, your teeth are chattering."

"It's *cold*."

He came back from hanging up his cap. "I've been getting a line on the winters out here on the Hook. They're pretty stiff, they say—worse than on the mainland."

"Have some hot coffee. I'm getting lunch."

"Let's see that coat of yours. Yep, it's pretty shot."

"I've had it two seasons—and it's light weight besides."

"You'll have to have a new one," he said. "I've been thinking about that to-day. We've got to both of us get some heavy stuff. What'll it be, kid—let our payments fall behind, or more charge accounts, or borrow more from the bank?"

She shuddered: "Oh, let's not borrow any more. Anything but that. Let's get *this* note paid off first."

"But we can't wait to do that before buying winter stuff. All my uniforms are light weight, and I haven't even got an overcoat. Gosh—and we haven't even finished paying for these outfits I've got."

"I guess we shouldn't have got so much for the house—we could have the uniforms finished by now if we hadn't."

"But, damn it, we had to have what we got. And, by gosh, we were right to get *good* stuff and not have to go through the same thing again, more or less, later on. It was that note on the bank for the down payments that's got us sunk for the present. Gosh, Jan—no kiddin', I feel like heck ringing you in on all this. If I'd only had something saved up——"

"Oh, don't think about that."

He stopped her and kissed her and tipped her face back to see her eyes. "Are you still with me, ol'-timer? Going to stick by me, honest to gosh?"

"Oh, yes—sure."

"Well," he said, "pretty soon we'll have the rugs and stuff off and then we can start laying in the things that count—good dishes and linen and silverware."

"I don't care if we never get them. Then we'd have to entertain—now we've got a good excuse."

He laughed at her. "You'll like entertaining once you get into it. Look at the kick Mom gets out of it."

"Well, Mom likes social responsibility. And she doesn't mind the hypocrisy—she's used to it."

"What do you mean, hypocrisy?"

"Why, entertaining people that talk about you behind your back and that you talk about too if you're that way yourself! Bothering with a lot of people you don't give a damn about—why should we spend the little bit of money we've got on people we don't care anything about when there's so much we need for ourselves?"

"Well, we'll be expected to keep our end up."

"Well, what if we are expected to? We ought to have the courage of our convictions!"

"You can't have any convictions about your social duties. What would you do when people ask you out, huh? Turn 'em down?"

"That's what we're doing now!"

"Sure, but we can't go on doing it forever. Everybody knows we're broke now. By gosh, that's one thing you've got to hand the army—you can admit you're broke, and it's no disgrace."

"Everybody else is generally broke too. If they'd all get together and agree not to spend money on a lot of dumb dinners they could save some money."

"Well," he said, "anyhow, people know we ran off and haven't got anything to entertain with, and they don't expect so much of us now. But they will after a while, and it's up to us to get stuff together as soon as we can—after a few months we won't have the excuse of being broke."

"Well, we can make up some other excuse; then they'll take the hint and stop asking us. That's what you'd do in cit life. Why *can't* it be like it is in cit life—just be able to choose your own crowd and say to hell with the rest?"

"You can choose your own crowd. Every post is full of cliques—you know that."

"Yes, but you can't say to hell with the rest! You never can get away from obligations! I'd *like* to play around with the few our own age here that we like, if we could afford it. But it can't stop there. Once we start having anybody in we'll have to have the whole post—pay everybody back that has us or that's asked us and then begin all over again!"

"Well, that's how the social life of a post keeps going."

"But why *should* it keep going?"

He said a little dreamily: "Damn it, kid, don't you see something kind of nice—kind of inspiring or something—about a post—huh? Everybody all having the same life and interests and struggles and ambitions and living so near together and kind of belonging to each other and sticking together—a hell of a lot closer than just a town——"

"You know damn well we haven't got a single thing in common with ninety per cent. of the people on any post! And why *don't* they stick together, then, instead of pulling everybody to pieces behind their backs?"

"How soon's lunch ready?" he said. "I guess I'll go down and take a look at that busted grate."

§ 4

THROUGH the single smeared window of the basement laundry room she could see the parade ground covered with the first thick snow of the winter.

The heat from the furnace at the other end didn't carry well through the dampness, and the laundry room was chill.

Her knuckles were raw, and the blood got on the sheets and towels in the tub; there were broken blisters on her palms from wringing and cold aches in her shoulders, and she put her head down on her arm on the washboard and sobbed in the brief tearless hysteria of nervous exhaustion.

She heard the kitchen door shut and a whistle, and straightened quickly, drying her soapy arms and hair on her apron.

He was standing at the top of the basement stairs, waiting, his arms full of flowers.

"Why, where'd you get them?"

"At the greenhouse. Don't you know what to-day is, huh?"

"Oh—another anniversary?"

"Nothin' else but. Five months to-day, ol'-timer."

She went into his arms, kissing him, leaning against him to rest.

"What's the matter, darlin'? All tired to hell?"

"Oh, I've just been—exercising hard."

"What are you doing—the washing? Damn it, kid——"

She took the flowers to the sink, and he followed.

"Sure you aren't getting fed up on washtubs and pots and pans and brooms and things—huh, kid?"

"Oh, no—I keep telling you 'no.'"

He sat down beside the sink. "Well, I don't know—sometimes I get to feeling like hell over at the company thinking about you back here working away like you do. Wrestling with this cranky old coal range—scrubbing this big rough floor—scrubbing my shirt cuffs—no kiddin', Jan, sometimes damn if I don't just want to bust out crying, thinking about what a regular little soldier you are."

"Oh, don't start all that stuff again."

"And when you tell me," he went on, his blue eyes very bright under the red curls that around the house, unslicked,

still fell tousled over his forehead, "when you tell me like you do that you wouldn't do it all for any other fellow but me—damn it all, kid—gosh, I love you!"

"You know it's true."

They sat together then in the kitchen chair.

"Thank you for the flowers."

"Gosh, darlin', I wish I could get you a lot of swell things. You'll have 'em some day, by God!"

"I don't want anything but you."

"I want more than you because I want things *for* you. I wish you could have got a better coat—a fur one. Gosh, listen to that wind. You ought to have some good warm dresses too. If you'd have let us borrow another hundred——"

"If we'd borrowed another hundred *you'd* have had a new heavy uniform instead of just wool B. V. D.'s and an overcoat. You have to go out in the cold. I can stay home."

"Damn it, that's all you can do, kid—that's what hurts. That's what I get to thinking about over at the company—you staying in all the time, working so damn hard—never getting out to have a good time. Say, I thought of something else to-day—d'you know we haven't had a shot of liquor since we've been married, huh? Five months!"

She nodded.

"Have you missed it, kid? Have you?"

"Well—sometimes I've sort of remembered—our old Huffolk parties."

He held her tightly. "By gosh, kid, those *were* good old days, weren't they? Jan—would you like 'em back—instead?"

She shook her head.

"But you miss 'em just the same. By gosh—I've been so damn happy and contented myself with things just as they are, I'd almost forgotten they'd ever been any different."

Forgotten that life was going to be one long Saturday, she thought, smiling very faintly inside.

"We couldn't have afforded it, anyhow," she said aloud.

"No, but maybe after all we might have accepted our friends' invitations now and then and gone and drunk some of their liquor. They know how it is with us—we'd be able to pay 'em back some time."

"My clothes—you know I couldn't have gone any place anyway since cold weather. All my last winter's things are all out of style."

"Kid," he said, "Chases are having another little rally to-night. Let's go over."

"Why, they didn't ask us."

"Yes, they did. Bob asked us, over at the company. They're always asking us—damn it, they aren't going to believe pretty soon it's because we're broke—they'll think we're high-hat. Bob says what the heck if we can't pay our way—he says they're asking us, not our pay check. How about it, kid? Wouldn't you like to run over a while?"

"Oh, I'd like to, but—my clothes——"

"Oh, hell, kid, you look swell in anything. You've got it over every other girl or woman on the post like a tent."

He said then: "Come on, ol'-timer. Put on that blue dress I like and let's go have a swell time. How about it? Shall I go phone Bob and Myra we'll be up?"

"All right," she said.

He was sitting on the foot of her bunk in the morning, fully dressed; sitting watching her wake, with lines she had never seen before all over his face.

Memory of the evening before, an enveloping nightmare, crushed her into her pillow.

"I just want to know one thing, kid," he said. "Do you love—him?"

"Oh, Dickie—I was just crazy——"

"For God's sake, what ever made you do it?"

"Oh, the liquor—it's been so long—I just went crazy!"

"But what made you think of *him*? Have you been thinking about him all these months we've been——"

"No, no, no, I haven't, Dickie! I'd forgotten all about him, I swear—I've just loved you! I don't know what made me do it—I didn't *know* what I was doing! I just heard them play 'Kalua' and got a sentimental jag! It wouldn't mean a thing to me sober—I swear, I swear!"

"But what made you want to pass out? Damn it, it must mean something if it hits you like that."

"Oh, it was our song—that we used to play Christmas when he was there for Christmas leave—I told you before——"

"I know, but for God's sake, it must mean something still if it can hit you like that."

"But it doesn't—it doesn't! Oh, honest, Dickie, I'm sober now, and I'm telling the *truth*—I haven't thought of him at all—I've just loved you."

"God," he said, "it was pretty damn awful! All those women looking at each other. They'll have it all over the whole post."

"Oh, I know—" she sobbed—"I know."

"I don't know how we'll look 'em in the face."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dickie—that's all I can say—I'm sorry—I'm sorry!"

He was so still that for a moment she thought he had tiptoed away. She peered out under her arm.

"Tell the truth, kid," he said. "Do you wish you'd married him?"

"No!" she cried. "I don't! I don't, I don't, Dickie! It was just the liquor—it didn't mean a thing—I swear, I swear!"

"Well, if I thought it did, you could go—now. If I thought you loved him—kid, if you did—if you do—why, it was pretty rotten of you to everybody—to marry me."

"But I don't, I don't! I don't love anybody but you! I was just crazy, that's all! Oh, won't you please, please, please forget everything—please?"

He knelt beside her and the floor between the bunks and lifted her from her pillow.

"I'll try, kid," he said. "God—I'll try."

§ 5

SHE was reading for the seventh time Mom's letter enclosing a sprig of pussy willow when he looked up from a scrawl of figures he had been making.

"Well, kid, by February first we'll be sitting on the world."

She had been so far away that his voice startled her. "February first—but it's gone!"

"What the hell—*next* February first!"

"February first—next year?"

"Sure. That's doing pretty darn well, considering. Just a little over a year and a half, altogether. Less than a year yet. Then—hot dog! We'll start stepping, ol'-timer!"

Finally she said: "But—but—does that mean—I'll have to wait a year—to go home?"

"Damn it, kid," he said, "you know my sentiments on the subject. By gosh, I'd like to see you get a visit to Mom and Dad—specially after me running off with you the way I did. If we were fixed so——"

She said, her voice trembling: "I just haven't got the heart to tell Mom again."

"I know—I hate like hell to have to do it. But, darn it, they know how we're fixed. Why doesn't Mom come up here?"

"You know she's too nervous to make the trip."

"Well, by gosh, you'll go to Jonathan Wayde the first thing we can afford after we get something clear. But for the time being——"

"They keep on wanting to help so. They can't seem to see how we feel about their sending any money, even for that. But it doesn't seem *fair*—to them—not to try to manage somehow."

"Well, Jan, I tell you, if we were fixed so——"

"Now you see," she said, "if I'd gone on to Europe and learned how to help out, we wouldn't be struggling along like this."

He blinked at her. "Well, what the hell, Jan? You know I wanted you to go. You know I felt guilty as hell making you lose out on your trip. Damn it, you know I've always said I'd make it up to you any way possible if the chance ever came."

He waited for her reply and, receiving none, said a little fearfully: "What's the matter, kid? Not getting discouraged, are you?"

"Oh—no. Only—oh, sometimes it does seem like the sitting-on-the-world time keeps getting farther and farther away."

He's been expecting me to say that for the last two or three months, she thought, seeing his face.

"You've been such a good little sport," he said to her at last in a strained voice. "Damn it, it's been the way you've pulled along with me through our hard times that's made me love you the way I do. Kid—you aren't going back on me now?"

She rose uncertainly; nervously. "Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to talk like that."

She stood in the threshold with her back to him; said again over her shoulder: "I'm sorry."

He said: "I guess you do need a rest, ol'-timer. You need pretty bad to get away from washtubs and stoves and dishpans for a while."

She ventured faintly: "If I don't go down home pretty soon I won't have anything to wear again. Now I've got all my old summer things—even if everyone at Jonathan Wayde will recognize them."

"Say, kid," he said, brightening, "now that you've found all that bunch of stuff to wear you can take in the bridge club, can't you?"

She turned toward him again, and he stirred in his chair.

"I've been thinking—" he said—"no kiddin', Jan—how about getting Bob and Myra to teach us—both of us?"

"To play *bridge*?"

"Sure! I'll tell you, it's sort of seemed to me lately—honest to gosh, the more I think about it the more it seems to me like we'd ought to learn. I'm not so darn sure we haven't kind of got the wrong slant on this entertaining business—falling out on every bid because we're broke and can't come back at 'em. And this couple and that keeps asking us in to a couple of tables in the evening—at least, they used to till they all got wise finally we didn't play. Well, it wouldn't set us back much to put out a few bottles of ginger ale and a couple of rounds of sandwiches once in a while, and if we played, why that'd be an easy way of keeping our end up and getting around and showing people even if we are broke we're not so high-ranking we can't associate with 'em! And as for the bridge club, kid, why every woman on the post belongs, and they're going to think you're queer as hell if you don't get started sometime going around with 'em . . ."

Her eyes made his voice trail away.

"Dickie! Do you know what you said? You sounded exactly like Mom! Gosh, didn't you *know* that was just the sort of thing I married you to get away from?"

He was still, looking at her. "Was that the only reason, Jan?" he asked then.

"What do you mean?"

"Just—an escape—was that all I was?"

"Oh, don't be dumb!" she cried, angry at her own confusion. "You know I didn't even mean to come to live with you like I did!"

Finally he said: "And sometimes you still wish you hadn't had to, don't you, kid?"

She tried to answer that, but finding no reply of just the right sort, turned and left him quietly, pulling the door to behind her.

§ 6

"I MUST dash," Myra Chase said. "I've got a sweet job waiting for me—fixing up my one and only formal evening dress for the Colonel's farewell hop. What are you going to wear?"

"I haven't got anything. I'm not going."

"Not going, me eye. Try and get out of it. The whole post has got to turn out."

"Well, not me. I haven't got a single decent evening thing, either formal or informal."

"Well, you'd better get busy and overhaul something p. d. q., because everyone's expected to turn out, and you'll be very conspicuous by your absence."

Settling down to read before the bedroom fire, Dickie said that night: "They're having a big farewell party for the Herfords to-morrow evening. We'll have to go, kid."

"Why?"

"Because! The whole post has got to go! It won't cost us anything. We pay hop dues anyhow—damn it, there's no reason why we shouldn't have been taking in the hops at least, all this time."

"Except that I haven't had anything decent to wear."

"Well, can't you fix up something for this? You used to have a lot of stuff at Jonathan Wayde—why can't you doctor up some of that?"

"I couldn't possibly fix anything," she said, "because the

last new things I had were when I got out of school—two years ago—and they're all hopeless. You know I didn't go out all the time you were there, and I hadn't been for a long time before too. I don't know what I'm keeping all that junk for—it might as well be thrown away."

"Well, how about all that stuff you found just lately?"

"That's all summer daytime stuff. Sport things and afternoon."

He laid his book across his knees. "Well, Jan—this is an occasion that's kind of special. I thought you'd understand the sort of formation it is and, by gosh, know what you'd ought to do. It's a farewell party to the C. O., and it'd be God-damn discourteous to fall out on it!"

"I do understand," she said, "and I would go—for you—no matter how much I hate receiving lines and all that dumb stuff. But I'm *not* going in a dress up to my knees when everybody else is wearing long skirts!"

"Why can't you let down a hem or something?"

"Because the only one I've got that's even possible is just finished with beads!"

He got up and stood by the hearth, putting his chair aside. "Well," he said, "you better do something—because you'd a damn sight better show up in an out-of-style dress than not show up at all. If it was a hell of a big post, maybe you could get away with not turning out, but this post is small, and you know what a stickler for etiquette the old man is. By God, if I ever went up for Class B I believe he'd have something to say for me about failure to show up at his good-bye blow-out! Damn it, Jan, I wish you'd try to get it through your head the importance of a thing like this!"

She flung: "You can go! You don't need to stay home on my account! It's you that owes the duty anyway—not me!"

"It's both of us! Anything military concerns me, but social duties apply to both of us, and you know it damn well, because that's what you've been kicking about from the start—having to shoulder your share of social obligation! We pay hop dues whether we go or not, so you haven't had the usual excuse of being broke, but just the same you haven't wanted to go to the hops, and we haven't gone—you've had your way. But you

might do this for me for once, since it's a thing this time that might go down in black and white against my record!"

"You know damn well it would never get into your efficiency report that you didn't go to a hop!"

"It might when the formation's as important as this one and when I hadn't been to any for the whole year I'd been at a post! If we'd been going to 'em regularly or even once in a while, then it wouldn't look so damn funny now—we might get away with letting it be thought you were sick! But when we haven't turned out once since we've been here and don't go to this one either, why, the only thing people can think is that we don't know what we'd ought to do or else just plain don't *give* a damn!"

She said, her voice shaking: "Oh, Dickie, will you please go to the damn dance yourself and let me do as I please?"

"Do as you please—that's all you ever do! How about forgetting your damn selfishness for once and doing something for your husband's sake?"

She stood by the dresser, fumbling with the things on its top, staring at him in the mirror. He stared back, and then put his hands over his face and dropped into his chair, hunched over his knees.

"I'm sorry, kid! Oh, Jan—I'm sorry—I'm sorry——"

She walked past him and went downstairs and out the front door, quietly, and crossed the road and crept over the sea wall, and lay face down on the beach, sobbing into the cold sand.

HE CAME in at noon and stood beside her where she knelt at her oven.

"How's the draft working now?"

"Oh, it's been better lately."

"God, this kitchen's worse'n hell fire on a hot day. Why don't you let the damn stove alone and just give us salads and cold things?"

"We are having a salad, but I'm making biscuits too."

He went upstairs to wash and was down again presently, helping carry the plates to the kitchen table.

"Kid—know what day this is?"

She glanced at the tradesman's calendar on the wall. "Oh—our first real anniversary."

"Nothin' else but. A whole year!"

He asked her then: "Does it seem shorter or longer?"

"Shorter in some ways," she said, "and longer in others. So much has happened. We—we've come such a long way."

He sat down at the table. "Yep—a hell of a long way from your upstairs porch asking each other how it felt to be married."

She said, shrugging: "We were two different people then."

She turned back to the stove, and he caught a string of her apron.

"Kid—what's been the matter with us lately?"

She faced him again, forlornly all at once. "Gee, Dickie—I wish I knew!"

"We seem to have gotten so far away."

"I know it."

"What is it, kid?" He held onto her apron a little desperately. "Have you quit—loving me?"

She slipped to her knees, flinging her arms across his lap. "No, Dickie! No, no, no—just as much as ever—I do!"

"Darlin'——"

"We've just gotten on each other's nerves," she said after a moment, wiping her eyes on his handkerchief.

He sighed: "Well, I guess this is marriage, kid. Nobody gets along without a run-in once in a while. We've got to beat the game, ol'-timer—try a little harder to be patient and make allowances."

"Oh, yes."

"By gosh, it's this damn sticking so close to ourselves and never getting around for any amusement or fun like we used to. We *did* use to have a swell time together, didn't we, ol'-timer? Huh, kid?"

"Oh, yes—that's it—it's just been so different from the way we planned."

"Kid," he said, holding her tightly, "just stick it out with me a little bit longer, and, by gosh, we'll be sitting on the world before we know it! And then we'll have our old parties again, by gosh. And we'll buy out the whole damn town—for you, kid—by God, all for you!"

§ 2

THE Post Exchange bus let her out at the back curb and rolled on. He met her at the kitchen door.

"For God's sake, where've you been? I thought you'd run off or something!"

She kissed him—the perfunctory dab that her hello kiss had become. "Have you been home long?"

"Two hours!"

"I guess it is late," she said.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Oh—fooling around."

She went through to the living room, and he followed.

"I'm hungry as hell!"

"Well, I'll get dinner in a minute—I'm tired."

She tossed her hat at a table and sank into a chair.

"Tired from what?"

She said: "From selling hats."

"From *what*?"

"Dickie," she told him, "I've got a job."

"You—you've——"

"I *had* to, Dickie," she said. "I couldn't stand this. At least, that is—I could as long as I didn't want anything special. But I want to go to Jonathan Wayde."

He stood in the middle of the floor, staring at her.

"Where are you working?" he asked in a queer voice.

"In a specialty shop in Redfern. Selling resort stuff to the beach people. It—it's fun. And I get eighteen dollars a week."

"For God's sake," he said. "Jan, you can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Why, hell! What do you suppose the post'll say when it gets around? An officer's wife——"

"Dickie! You pull that line on me once more and I'll leave you and never come back!"

"But, damn it, kid, use a little sense, can't you? Suppose some of the ladies of the post walked in on you? Suppose the C. O. heard about it? God, it's not as if we were cits."

"I don't care who knows about it," she said. "There's nothing dishonorable about an honest job. And as for the ladies of the post, I wish they would walk in on me—then they'd see I've got a damn good reason for not going to their old bridge club!"

"But, damn it, Jan, it'll look like your husband can't support you!"

"Well, you can't! Not and give me the things I want and need! Oh, I don't *want* to be supported—that's the truth, Dickie! If you could know how I've hated right from the start to have to ask you for money—five dollars for a pair of shoes—even a dollar and a quarter for stockings."

"You haven't had to ask! The money's in your name too!"

"Oh, as if that made it mine! I want money of my own—money that I earn myself! I can't explain how I feel—nobody else seems to feel this way. Maybe it's because I have earned my own money when I was a kid, and thought I'd always be doing it, by some decent way. Anyhow I *had* to do what I did to-day. I saw the ad and answered it. I'm going to earn my ticket home. And have a new dress, even if I have to buy the material and make it myself!"

He was standing with his back to the fireplace, his hands clasped behind him.

"Well, you can't do it, Jan," he said. "We'll get Mr. Cummings at the bank to let us have another hundred. And you take it and buy yourself some clothes and go to Jonathan Wayde."

"Borrow *more*——"

"Well, if you've got to have the cash you've got to have it."

"But I'm *getting* it! My own way! I'm not asking you for it! We can't borrow more, the circumstances we're in now, and you know it damn well!"

"Well," he said, "you can't go on doing what you're doing. That's flat."

They confronted each other.

"Do you really think you're going to stop me?"

"By God, you'll see!"

She picked up her hat and left the room.

"You can go to the P-Ex for your dinner," she said. "I'm going to get some extra rest for to-morrow."

Two days later he came in while she was getting dinner.

"Well, it's around the post."

"What of it?"

"You'll have to give it up, Jan."

"I'm not going to. I told you that."

"Damn it, get this straight, will you? An officer's wife can't be a shopgirl!"

"I'm proving that she can!"

She faced him over the kitchen table, stirring a pot of mashed potatoes viciously.

"Well, by God, you will quit!"

"I won't!"

"I can make you quit legally! I can go there and tell them——"

"You *dare* to do that and I'll clear out to-morrow and you'll never see me again!"

He caught her by her shoulders and shook her. "By God, you'll get over your damn stubbornness!"

She screamed at him and hurled the pot of potatoes past his head into a corner and wrenched out of his hands and ran from the kitchen.

Sobbing across her bunk, she heard the back screen door slam. At nine o'clock he had not returned.

Nor at ten; nor eleven; nor twelve.

At twelve-thirty she went out and lay on the beach below the sea wall, staring up at the stars.

At one-thirty she went in again, and to bed alone, staring up still at the ceiling through the dark.

The alarm clock in the window woke her, and she put her hand out quickly to the pillow and the narrow space beside her and sat up, wide awake and chill.

She called in a frightened voice: "Dickie!"

Springing out of bed, she ran to the bathroom and to the head of the stairs, calling again loudly: "*Dickie! Dickie!*"

She dressed, then, her hands trembling, and went down to the kitchen, where the mashed potatoes still lay in a corner, swarming with ants. She scooped them up and mopped the floor and washed the pot and the other utensils on the sink and put the uneaten dinner on the stove away in the ice box.

Without eating breakfast, then, she went out to the back steps to wait for the Post Exchange bus.

He was not at the kitchen door to meet her in the evening.

She went upstairs, fearfully, holding to the banister, and he came out of one of the bare rooms.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," she answered coldly, crying in her heart, *Thank God!—thank God!*

He followed her into the bedroom. "I'm sorry, kid—about last night."

She didn't answer.

"I was with Jerry Oakes over at his quarters."

"Oh."

"You made me sore as hell, kid."

"You did me too."

"I know, but—something kind of snapped for me. I never felt like that in my life, Jan. God—throwing things—like a cheap, dirty tenement brawl!"

She went downstairs, and he followed and sat watching her as she moved to and fro, starting dinner.

"Can't you see how I felt, kid?"

"I guess so. But how do you think I felt when you didn't come home?"

"I know, but it just—it got me, Jan. I couldn't believe we'd come to that. I thought I was going nuts—I had to get the hell out and stay out. What made you do it, kid?"

"Oh, I was just crazy mad, that's all."

"Well, let's call a truce. God, we can't go on like this. How about it? Is it all over—huh?"

She looked into his pleading eyes steadily. "Yes—except—I'm not going to quit my job."

"Oh, well, hell, kid, keep it," he groaned in utter weariness. "I'm tired—clean through."

He went to the screen door and stood looking out, hands in his breeches pockets.

"Come on," she called.

They sat down at the kitchen table. Looking across at him through her lashes, she saw the strained lines around his mouth.

She drew a breath. "Dickie—I'm not coming back here after I go to Jonathan Wayde."

She saw him go horribly white and hurried to add, although she had not meant to at once: "Not right away, I mean."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

"I'm going to New York."

"New York?"

"To take a course in design—to make up for Europe. I've been thinking about it for a long time now. I made up my mind to-day."

He put down his laden fork and pushed his plate away. "What the hell, kid—what the hell do you think you're going to take a course in design on?"

"My own money," she said. "My Liberty Bond money that I earned doing farm work during the war and that I've been saving all along. That's what I was going to use in Europe along with whatever Mom and Dad could afford. I thought you knew about it."

"I'd forgotten. Why didn't you use that for clothes and to go to Jonathan Wayde?"

"Because I'd sworn to myself I'd never touch it except for something to make up for Europe. Maybe you thought I'd given up all hope of ever studying now. Well, I never have."

His face was working queerly. "Damn it, Jan—I wish you'd talk your ideas over with me once in a while."

"That's what I'm doing now," she said.

His face had gone from white to a strange dull red. "Well, what do you expect me to do—agree?"

She stared at him. "Why—why—I thought—I thought you'd be glad—you always said——"

"I know," he said, leaning on the table and putting his hand over his eyes. "But I didn't know then it'd be—under circumstances like these."

"You mean—because we've been fighting?"

His head moved up and down against his hand.

"Well," she said more gently, "then it's all the more logical now. It'd give us a rest—from each other. We need to get away."

"We'll get away when you go to Jonathan Wayde."

"Not for long enough."

"You could stay as long as you want there."

She shook her head. "But I want to do *this*, Dickie. And it isn't as if it was some place far away. That's why I want to do it now—we may never be where I'd have such a chance again. And you could come in to see me, and I could come back to Bancroft week-ends. It'd be almost like—like we were sweet-hearts again, just visiting that way. And we'd come back finally—like we used to be."

He let his hand slip to his cheek, and she saw the consummate anguish in his eyes.

"Are you sure you'd come back, ol'-timer?"

"Oh, of course. What else would I do?"

He gripped the tablecloth so hard that she reached toward his water glass. "Damn it, kid—if you had half an idea how much I've gotten to love you, maybe you'd understand!"

"Well, don't you think I love you too?"

"Do you, kid?"

"Oh, you know I do."

"Even if we do fight?"

She was in his lap then, crying against his red hair.

"Darlin'!" he said, kissing her shoulder where her yellow gingham dress had slipped away. "Gosh, I love you, kid—so much it scares me!"

"I love you too," she sobbed. "No matter how we do!"

"Last night," he said, holding her tightly, "I had such a lot of awful premonitions and bad dreams. I had a hell of a night, kid."

"Premonitions—about what?"

"About us."

"Oh, that's silly."

Presently he said, tipping her head back: "Darlin', if you went to New York, would you be a good girl?"

"Oh—yes."

"Wouldn't neck anybody else?"

"No, no!"

"Sure, kid?"

"Oh, yes, Dickie—oh, don't you *believe* I love you?"

"Well," he sighed, "I forgave you something once, because you were tight. But if you ever pull anything else on me—well, I might not be able to get over it so easy again."

"If I did neck," she teased him, "you could go ahead and do it too."

"Damn it, kid," he said, shaking her a little, "I've told you I don't want to. If you knew how *damn* much I love you——"

§ 3

THE first week in September she stopped work to get ready to go. Her course all arranged for, she was to stop off in New York October first, from Jonathan Wayde.

Getting ready to go was a bit sad. Dickie followed around so from room to room while she collected this belonging and that, leaning in the doorway and dropping onto the edge of the bunks to watch her pack.

He kept saying: "Are you sure you'll be good, kid?" And: "Are you sure you'll come back?"

When she went to pack the yellow gingham that had been her principal housework dress from the very beginning he caught it away from her.

"Please leave that, kid—will you?"

"But I want it to paint in, in New York. It isn't good for anything else."

"But you don't need it. Please don't take it away, kid. Just let it stay hanging up in the closet—please."

"Oh, you're so sentimental, Dickie," she laughed at him, putting it back on its hook.

The Chases had dropped in to tell her good-bye, bringing along another couple and a National Guard captain.

The moon was full, and the Chases invited everybody for a ride in their car.

"You go ahead, Jan," Dickie said. "I've got to check those damn instruments for target practice to-morrow—I can't go."

"But I don't want to go without you," she said, trying to remind him with her eyes: It's our last night.

"You go on, kid," he said, patting her arm. "I'll be tied up till midnight. I couldn't even stick around with you if you stayed. Go ahead and have a good time." He kissed her while the men got their caps. "I'll be waiting for you when you come back, darlin'."

So she had left him.

Bob Chase drove, and Myra sat beside him, and the Captain and Janet and the Markhams got in back. They sped out of the post onto the long unlit road up the spit.

The Captain drew something flat from his pocket that shimmered in the moonlight.

She thought quickly: Oh, well, I'll just take a shot or two so as not to be a flat tire. I'll be careful not to get tight.

She stood a moment looking down at him, clutching the head of the bunk to steady herself. Then she flung herself down beside him, shaking him by the shoulders.

"Dickie! Dickie—wake up! It's me! I'm tight!"

He propped himself on his elbow, his eyes wide and bright in the dark.

"Oh, God!" he said, flopping over away from her, head in his arms.

She was crying, her hands trying to turn his face back to her. "Dickie—I petted too——"

A queer sound came from him; a sort of sighing, sobbing moan. He burrowed deeper into his arms.

"Get to bed," he said. "Over there."

The other quartermaster bunk.

His face was as drawn and lined as though he had aged ten years during the night.

"Judas, kid," he said, looking away from her. "On our last night, too."

"Oh, I know—I feel just rotten, Dickie."

"Whatever made you do it, anyhow? Why did you get tight?"

"Oh, I keep telling you I didn't know I was getting tight. I just hadn't had any for so long!"

"That day," Dickie said, "your Dad and I had the talk in his office, he told me I was going to be sorry some day I'd taught you to drink. I think I laughed at him. Oh, God! Is this what you're going to be doing all the time you're away?"

"No! I'm not going to touch a single drop! I promise you that, Dickie, to make up for this!"

"It just seems I can't trust you after all, kid."

"But please forgive me just this once more! I'm so damn sorry and ashamed!"

"So am I," he said bitterly. "Ashamed to hold my head up around here any more. Ashamed to meet anyone around the post. God, I'm almost glad you're going away—if this is how you're going to help me start my career."

She fell to crying softly into her hands.

"It'll be all over the National Guard," he said.

"Oh, officers don't talk."

"The hell they don't! You don't know anything about some of those National Guard fellows. They don't have the same standards we have. It'd make a hell of a swell story—a regular officer's wife! The Markhams'll help spread it, too."

He moaned then: "I used to think I could trust you to the

end of the earth. I used to think my wife was the most honorable woman in the whole damn world."

"But it's just on account of the liquor, Dickie! And if I promise not to drink——"

"Would you keep your promise?"

"Oh, you know I would. A *promise*——"

"Oh, God, Jan——" he groaned, "let a stranger paw you—my wife——"

"Oh, I know—I'm just rotten, Dickie—I'm not good enough for you."

"On top of that other thing too—I don't know how we'll ever live it all down. If this is what our life together is always going to be maybe you'd better not come back. You can't do like this in the army—God, I don't know what'll become of my career."

She was still crying, leaning in the doorway. "But I don't want to not come back. I'll do different, Dickie—honest I will. All I can say is I'm sorry. I hate myself so——"

He swayed toward her, putting out his hands. "Oh—darlin'——"

After a while he lifted her head back from his breast.

"But, honest to God, kid," he told her, returned suffering sweeping the restored peace from his face, "I can't go on and on taking this sort of thing. I—I can't. I love you to beat hell, and I'm ready and willing to be true to you all the rest of our lives. But not if you're going to keep on knocking the guts out of me like this. Kid—if you ever come to me again and tell me you've necked someone else—well, I'm through—done—see? I'll turn you loose, by God—yes, sir, without a single damn regret! So from now on, kid, you make your choice. Understand?"

"Yes," she said.

Five minutes later he had to leave for target practice.

Turning back upstairs after saying good-bye, listening to the kitchen screen door slam, she thought a little confusedly: That's one of the most meaningful and saddest sounds in the world—the shutting of a door.

THE white boat from the North was sidling up to the pier, and Mom and Dad were below, waiting and waving, and her heart was bursting with many kinds of tears; and at last she was ashore.

"Mother's baby! Mother's precious only little chicken!"

"Mom—oh, Mom——" a little moan.

Dad laughing too heartily and wiping his eyes and his new spectacles and hugging both of them together.

"Oh, gee—it's been so long——"

"You're looking fine, Jan!"

"She looks older!"

Mom and Dad looking older too but one didn't say so. Dad gray by the ears and temples. Mom with gray streaks in her dulled blond hair and with faded, tired eyes.

Jokes and brave compliments and silly embarrassment; and underneath, pangs of old vain regrets and self-reproach, come inevitably back to life.

And now, sitting in the porch swing again waiting for Tommy, she felt only a great weariness and a queer numb pitying sorrow for all the loveliness of the world that can one time come to be so dead.

A little taller, a little broader shouldered in the new becoming dignity of his olive drab, she saw him marching along the sidewalk of Waterfront Row and got up and went down to the front hall.

Coming across the porch, his tawny hair was blowing, and his tanned face was flushed.

"Hello, Jannie."

"Hello, Tommy!"

They shook hands and stood together in the front hall, not knowing what else to say.

"Come on up."

They went up the stairs silently and out to the upstairs porch.

"Sit down."

Sitting beside each other in the swing then, they had to turn their flushed faces toward each other.

"Well—it's—it's great to see you again, Jannie."

"It's nice to see you. You—you look nice in o. d."

"Oh, it feels funny still. I didn't wear it much all summer."

"Did you go to see the folks?"

"Uh-huh—they're at McKinley Barracks."

"How are they?"

"They're fine."

He said then: "I was in a bathing suit most all summer. There's great swimming there."

"There's good swimming where we are too."

After another moment he said: "You've got taller, it seems like. Have you?"

"Oh, it's just the long skirt, I guess."

"I guess maybe it is. It makes you look older too—a little bit."

"Gosh, I was surprised when Mom said you were here."

"Well, I almost didn't make Coast. But I did."

She said: "I—I guess I thought you'd take the doughboys—now. You'd always wanted them—before."

He didn't say anything, and she thought, almost subconsciously in the little agony of her embarrassment, looking at his forgotten drooping lips: I'd forgotten his *youngness*.

§ 2

THE Nolans were packing to go away. Almost every one of the old post crowd was gone. Steve had sailed several months previously for Panama. Barbie and Juddy and their new little girl Barbie Lou were on the West Coast.

The Nolans, left at Jonathan Wayde for duty after the school term, had expected foreign service but were ordered to the Middle West instead. Sitting on a crated table helping Frances wrap pictures, Janet found her further changed.

"Heavens, Jan, when Barbie came over and said you were

gone, I felt cold in the pit of my tummy. It was one of those things that just don't happen—for you to drop out of my life without so much as good-bye."

"But if you knew how it all happened, Frances—Mom sick, and the packing at the last minute and everything—gosh, I hardly knew myself what was happening till I was gone!"

"I know, dear, of course I understood—even before your letter came. Such a brave letter—it worried me so until your next ones came, sounding different."

Talking like that, she was the old Frances. But with their conversation swinging for a moment to the general and the impersonal, the change showed; she seemed brusquer of movement and of speech. Her hands, busy with newspaper and excelsior, made little abrupt gestures as of a half-finished shrug, and her sentences seemed to trail off on a queer rising inflection become suddenly a note of listless, almost curt indifference to and even forgetfulness of whatever had just been said.

Twice, casually, she mentioned Dutch Heindrichs. Janet knew that Dutch had been transferred abruptly to the West Coast a year before to await foreign service; and people had whispered surmises, applauding a commanding officer's discretion.

§ 3

LYING in the sand in the bright sun opposite the range towers a week after their meeting, Tommy told about his being engaged.

"I don't know why I did it, Jannie. I was feeling like hell, remembering that if—if things hadn't gone the way they did *we'd* have been getting married right then. I guess I was looking for some way to try and forget about you. She looks a whole lot like you—acts like you, even. I used to call her Jannie by mistake."

She lay still beside him, her arms over her eyes.

"I'd been through plain hell, Jannie—ever since you got married. I'm ashamed of a heap of things now, but that doesn't do any good. The only way I can make up for 'em, I guess, is by being a good husband to her."

She said: "I wanted to write to ask you to—forgive me. But I just never seemed to get around to it."

"Oh, it's all right, Jannie—I never blamed you. If he's a better man, then he's made you happier than I could have, I guess."

She said with her arms over her eyes still: "If you knew how damn lucky you are—not to have got me. I'd have made you suffer too, the way I have him—I never have been able to make him happy."

"But, good gosh, doesn't he love you, Jannie?"

She said: "Yes, but just because you love a person doesn't mean you're happy with them, even if they love you just as much. Because—people who love each other can hurt each other so. When you're not in love, things just can't make any difference. I think you're really happier not having anything—or anybody—but yourself."

He told her: "It'd be worth being unhappy, though, Jannie, all a man's life—to be able to—to have a right to go on loving you."

She said, choking: "I don't see why anybody should love me. I just hurt everybody that does. Now my husband too—not only him but his career . . ."

§ 4

THEY were coming back now from a hike around the ramparts: a hike like a certain other one, because it was getting very near to another last day.

Down below, the old yellow frame house looked up, following their approach with its melancholy gable-window eyes.

"It seems like we ought to be going down the old stone steps."

"Does seem kinda like it, doesn't it?"

"We used to go around every morning, didn't we?"

"You betcha. Not quite as fast as this, though. You were just a little shaver then."

She said: "I guess you and Mom'll hate to leave just as much this time, too."

"Yes, but—guess we shouldn't have any kick coming this time. Four years—that's a pretty lucky stay."

"Gosh, I'll hate to go this time—worse than before. Now

that you and Mom are going—maybe I'll never see Jonathan Wayde again."

"Oh, I guess Dickie'll be coming back to the school some day, won't he? Never can tell when you're likely to come back for station, anyway, besides—huh?"

She didn't answer, and after a moment he said: "You betcha—old Jonathan Wayde's a pretty good old post."

"Well, anyway—I'm going to try New York."

Swinging in step now, down the last stretch toward the flagpole and the Reveille gun.

"Suppose you get to liking New York better'n Bancroft—huh?"

She said, turning her face up to his: "Oh—I *might*."

"Found out being married in the army's a pretty hard row to hoe?"

"Yes, but—it isn't just the being poor. And if I didn't go back it wouldn't be because I was a quitter—it'd be principally because—I just want him to have a chance to be happy!"

He ventured, gently still: "Maybe he thinks he wouldn't be, without you—huh?"

"But he would—he'd get used to it again—he didn't have me once, and he was happier then—— Oh, if you could know the difference in him now and before we were married!"

"Mom and I kinda thought he'd turned out better."

"But he's lost all his old joy of living look and way!"

"'Smatter—been leading him a pretty hard chase?"

"Oh, I just don't think I'm who he ought to have married."

"How does he feel about it?"

"Oh—he loves me!"

She asked then: "How did you know—I—you *did* know I was thinking about not going back?"

"Oh, I couldn't help noticing something was on your mind—specially the last few days."

"But I didn't want you to know! You and Mom have had enough worry over me already, and I know Mom worries anyway about my going to New York—even for the four months. I've talked it over with Frances—it worries her too, but she can stand it better than you and Mom. A little bit with Tommy too—not really about not going back, though, with him."

He said: "Sure it isn't Tommy that's got you kinda twisted up?"

She answered, looking up at him quickly: "Oh, no! I got here feeling this way, and I didn't even know Tommy was going to be here!"

"Well, I didn't know—I thought maybe you'd taken a notion to marry Tommy now, instead."

"Oh, no—gosh, no!"

Going down the graded descent by the flagstaff, he asked: "Why is it you have to make up your mind now? Why not wait and see how school goes, and then——"

"Oh, because I couldn't do it that way! If I'm going to do it I'll take my chances and not be such a hypocrite as to say, 'Well, I'll do it *if* I can make a success!'"

Cutting across the lawn of the white-pillared house from the bridge, he asked her: "What would you do if you did decide not to go back? Stay in New York all by yourself and work, or come on down to Panama?"

"Oh, I wouldn't sponge on you and Mom!"

"Well, you know wherever Mom and I are is your home when you want——"

"I know, but—I'd *want* to stay in New York and get a job."

§ 5

FRANCES was going now.

Standing in the bare hall with her while Colonel Nolan and the striker carried the suitcases out to the government Dodge, Janet said, trying to smile at her: "This house—it's almost as if I'd lived in it—Barbie's when we were little kids, and then yours——"

They walked silently, hand in hand, out of it to the waiting car.

Colonel Nolan got in front, and they sat in back together, clasping hands tightly still on Frances's knees. The cannon-ball stacks and the great oaks and the parade ground all went rolling past.

Donny, looking out the side, was trying not to cry.

Friends were waiting at the Calhoun station. Slipping out of the Dodge in the twilight, they hurried to the platform's far end.

"Oh, gosh, Frances——"

"Oh, dearest kid, I feel as though I'm leaving you just when you need me most!"

"But I'd always need you, Frances—there's no time you could ever pick to go away that I wouldn't be needing you to help me—not if life's going to go on being like this."

"It will, dear—count on it for that. But start now learning to meet it face to face, or it will crush you later."

"But tell me now, Frances! What shall I do?"

"Oh, darling—aren't you able to make 'most any sacrifice if you really love?"

"But that's what I'd be doing, if I go! It'll be just because I do love him so!"

"Are you sure you're sincere about that—with yourself?"

"Oh, yes—it's true I haven't been happy either and think I'd get to be happier free, but I do think of his sake mostly, and what he said."

"But he didn't mean—he was just so horribly hurt at the time, and he only meant things would have to change."

"But how can they? That's just it—I can't look ahead and see them ever any different! Oh, when I left and he said I was ruining his career I thought if he told me to stay away I'd just die! But these two weeks I've seen—I've known—he was right."

Friends hallooing, and running and pulling Frances away; back to the steps of the panting train.

Conductors' shouts. She waited by the steps, and Frances came at last, and they clung together, crying against each other's cheeks, unable to utter the word good-bye.

Colonel Nolan taking Frances away; shaking hands. Finally Frances at a window, eyes streaming, handkerchief to her mouth.

Group on the platform calling and waving and smiling and tapping on the glass.

Then the train moving away, leaving only the vivid lingering vision of a lovely weeping face.

§ 6

SITTING beside Tommy in the swing for the last time, she said: "The waves sound like crying instead of laughing to-night, and the crickets sound sad too. Do they sound that way to you, or is it just me?"

"Oh, God, Jannie—don't," he said.

Leaning their heads against the swing's back, their shoulders touching lightly, they breathed in the poignant fragrance of the night.

She told him: "Oh, I am so thankful to you—for being here—you don't know how you've helped."

He said miserably: "I haven't helped much. I know you're unhappy as hell, Jannie. Oh, God—I'd have tried so damn hard to make you happy—I wouldn't have fought with you."

"I would have with you, though. I'd have made you suffer the way I have him—I know I've made you suffer now, all the time you've been helping me."

"Oh, God, I don't care though, Jannie. Even if it has been so different, it's been you!"

That was the moment in which the half-forgotten past, on a waft of blowing honeysuckle, came back, sharp as grief.

She told him, half sobbing softly: "Oh, you have one place in my life—just you—you stand for—for the old me—for a kind of—of love that—that was all sweetness—and youngness. No matter what's happened, I can't help but—but always still love you in one way a little bit, underneath—remembering that."

"Jannie!"

Her head had slipped against his shoulder; and lifting her face, she kissed him on his trembling lips. He went weak against the back of the swing. Then she was crushed in his arms.

"Jannie! Jannie! Oh, good God, I've wanted you like this so damn bad I thought I couldn't stand it!"

She thought, through the creeping drugging numbness of a queer peace: *There.*

He pushed her away from him suddenly and put his face in his arms on the back of the swing, his fists clenched over his head.

"Don't, Jannie—oh, good God, you've chosen, and you've got to play fair, and so have I got to, too."

"But I'm choosing you now," she heard her voice saying. "It isn't a question of playing fair any more. He said I should make my choice—that if I petted anyone else he was through. And now I've decided. I don't want to go back."

"Jannie!"

She saw his pitiful mistake in his eyes. "Oh, no—I didn't mean that—I don't want to be married at all any more, to anybody. Anyhow, you're engaged."

"It's all your fault!" he flung. "Oh, God, Jannie, do you think I could ever love anybody but you? There hasn't been a single minute I haven't thought about you—even when I was kissing *her*! What do you think I boned Coast for still, even after I'd lost you, when you knew I'd always wanted the Infantry ever since I was a kid? Just to get back here and see you again, or any place else where you might happen to be, even though I knew it'd be plain hell to have to see you with him. Jannie, if you're going to leave him anyway, then come on and marry me like you promised first! Please, Jannie—*please*, Jannie——"

She shook her head. "Oh, I'm sorry. All I want is to-night. Just to-night—like we used to be."

She turned her lips to his again, the flowing tears running down her face.

§ 7

AND now, riding out the long spit again in the Post Exchange bus, she thought: Just keep on like this, *not feeling*—not feeling any more than this.

It was the dinner hour when the bus stopped at the back door. She saw him through the lighted kitchen window and heard his shout of surprised joy as he peered out, squinting into the twilight.

She came up the steps with her suitcase, and in the shabby back hall where the ice box stayed he caught her off her feet, kissing her over and over.

Struggling gently, she pushed him away, hands against his breast.

"I don't think you'll want to," she said. "I've petted somebody else again."

He let her go and stood very still, a ridiculous figure with a faded red-checked apron hung around his neck; with a soiled dish towel over one shoulder and a rusty-handled egg turner in one hand.

She told him: "I came back to pack up all my things. I'm going right on back to New York to-night."

He stood still, and brushing past him to the stove she said: "Whatever you're cooking is burning up."

There was a crisped lamb chop in a rusty skillet, and she slid it on the back of the range. She took off her hat and coat and scraped the black from the chop and shoveled it along with his dried-out vegetables onto a plate.

"Here's your dinner," she said.

The kitchen was in complete disorder. She went upstairs to slip out of her traveling dress.

I'll clean up the place for him before I go back, she resolved. He'll probably appreciate that much, anyhow.

She went to the closet to put her train dress away and saw hanging by both its shoulders on two hooks the yellow gingham she had left behind. She pulled it over her head.

When she got back to the kitchen he was still standing by the back hall door. The egg turner was still in his hand, and his face, in contrast to the bright hair falling about his forehead, was very pale. The strange expression replacing the bewilderment in his eyes as she appeared in the doorway startled her to a halt.

"Wh-why—what's the matter, Dickie?"

He said: "*You* take off her dress!"

She went over to him, waveringly, a little fearfully.

"What's the matter, Dickie?" she said again, trying to make her voice sound soothing when it was really frightened. Afterwards, looking back, she remembered thinking at the same time: I've talked exactly like this to horses.

He stepped back as she approached, letting the egg turner and the dish towel fall to the floor. Then, backing away from her, he bumped through the swinging pantry door. She followed, and he went on into the living room and dropped into a chair.

beside a table, where playing cards were laid out in solitaire formation. He sat a moment looking at the cards; then he ran his fingers through his hair and his head drooped forward on his arm.

She stared, not understanding. She had never seen Dickie cry.

"Wh-what's the matter, Dickie?" she quavered a third time.

He said: "You broke—your promise."

"I didn't! I never promised I wouldn't!"

"You promised not to drink."

"I didn't!" she flung. "Didn't drink, I mean! I was cold sober this time!"

She saw him flinch, and she said: "I did just as you told me. I made my choice."

"Who?"

"Tommy," she said, her chin high.

He was very quiet for a while. Then: "You want to go to him," he stated dully.

"No, I don't. I just want to go—free. I don't want to be married any more."

She waited for his answer. Finally: "You said," she reminded him, "you'd want me to go."

He shook his head, clutched now in both arms.

"Y-you mean—you don't want me to go—after all—even when I've petted again?"

His bright head wagged an indisputable negative.

"But you said——"

"I didn't know it would be like this."

She walked over to him then, confused, vaguely rebellious through the lasting numbness.

"Dickie——"

He caught her around the waist, pressing his face against her.

"Don't leave me, Jan—for God's sake, don't go for good, kid! I couldn't go on without you, knowing you weren't ever coming home! God, these last weeks have been hell! Stick with me, kid, for Christ's sake—give me one more chance."

"Give *you* one more chance——"

"To make you happy!" he said.

SHE thought that she must be going a little mad now, for she was thinking of Fourth Street as a woman: a drunken woman reeling maudlinly; a profane shouting wanton, the lights of night clubs vulgar pseudo gems on a shabby, ribald breast.

A man standing in a glittering doorway said, "Hello, cutie," and she shrank away. A young girl with a corrupt white face fell against her out of a taxicab, and she tried to run on the weak, failing feet of nightmare.

A dead cat, pregnant, lay in the gutter across Sixth Avenue, and she stumbled upon its swollen belly bloated further by death. She put her head down against the cold and the wind and fought on, sobbing as she walked.

High above on the right of the Square a yellow cross went out against the black sky, leaving a wan lingering ghost of itself upon the night.

A man was lying on a bench huddled into a ragged coat, a crushed hat over his face. Dirt blew in a swirl over his hunched body, and he put up a bare hand and pulled his hat closer and moaned as she passed.

She pressed on toward the busses and halted at the fountain, bewildered at the behavior of the avenue of lights stretching north from the arch; staring as they ran liquidly together, washing the deserted street with a yellow flood.

Certain of madness now, she drove her weakening legs across the road and stood frightened, watching rows of facing benches snapping the whip across the walk and the dead grass.

She heard a low hoarse voice say, "Hullo," and tried to flee, as she had learned to do at the greetings of strangers, but instead she stood motionless, watching the slow tears of utter childish terror drop onto her clenched clasped hands.

There was a thin slouched girl's figure on a bench under a ghostly tree.

"Don't be scared," the hoarse voice said. "Sit down, will you? I wish to God you would."

She tried to explain that she was going mad, but no words would come. She wavered toward the slowing benches, conscious above all of the necessity of rest.

"Go ahead, park a while," the hoarse flat voice said. "I need like hell to talk to someone. In about twenty minutes I'm going to kill myself. Don't be scared—I'm not crazy, I swear that. If you are scared though, go ahead—get the hell on. But I wish you'd stay. It'd be white of you, if that means anything to you."

The benches were still again now. She sat down because she would have fallen, and fought an agony of faintness and fear and threatening hysteria.

"You're down on your luck too," the voice under the tree said. "Say, why don't you come along? I'd like company."

A man crossed the street below, gaunt and soundless as a shadow, and she thought of him as Death, stalking in the garb of the living to be the less suspected.

"I want to live."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"God," the voice said.

The face under the tree had become a wide white blot in the darkness, featureless, amorphous.

"I've got a dime," the voice was saying. "That's all. So in a few minutes, after you won't stay any more, I'm going over to Sixth Avenue to a drug store and buy a razor blade. Then I'm coming back here and park under this tree again and open up my wrists and let the blood go into the ground. That's as clean a way as any when you haven't got any gas."

The white blot was distorting further in the moonlessness, grimacing into misproportioned hideousness like a reflection in a freak mirror in an amusement palace.

The voice demanded sharply: "Say, what the hell's the matter with you, anyhow, kiddo? Are you sick?"

"Hungry——" Janet said.

§ 2

*God—be-with-you-till-we-MEET—a—gain . . . Some—
thing-an-gel-arms-up-ho-o-o-old—you . . . don't-let-moth-*

er-wor-ry, don't-let-moth-er-wor-ry, don't-let-moth-er-wor-ry, don't-let-moth-er-wor-ry, don't-let-MOTH-er-WOR-ry, don't-let-MOTH-er-WOR-ry, drums thumping on your head, horses galloping over your bed, don't let *moth-er-wor-ry*, don't-let-MOTH-er-WOR-ry, drums going away instead, feet marching over your bed, horses galloping on your head, *God—be-with-you-till-we-MEET—a—gain*, drums coming back again, moth-er-won't-cry-anymore, moth-er-won't-cry-anymore, moth-er-won't-cry-anymore, moth-er-won't-CRY-anymore, moth-er-won't-CRY-anymore, thumpa-thump-THUMPeta-thump, thumpa-thump-THUMPeta-thump, thumpa-thump-THUMPeta-thump, *God—be-with-you-till-we-MEET—a—gain* . . . *Some—thing-an-gel-arms-up-ho-o-old—you* . . . faces at a deck, faces with no shape, faces with no noses, faces like dough faces, faces making faces, faces rushing closer laughing, ha-ha-ha-*ba*-ha, ha-ha-ha-*ba*-ha, ha-ha-ha-HA-ha, ha-ha-ha-HA-ha, ha-ha-ha-HA, ha, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, come-see-our-NICE-room, come-see-our-NICE-room, come-see-our-NICE-room, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, be-mother's-good-girl be-mother's-good-girl, be-mother's-*good*-girl, be-mother's *good*-girl, be-mother's-GOOD-girl, be-mother's-GOOD-girl, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, drums going away again, drums coming back again, drums thumping on your head, horses galloping on your bed, come-see-us-soon-Chick, come-see-us-soon-Chick, come-see-us-soon-Chick, come-see-us-*soon*-Chick, come-see-us-*soon*-Chick, come-see-us-SOON-Chick, come-see-us-SOON-Chick, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP-thump, thump-thumpa-THUMP, thump . . .

She thought at first, waking, that *it's-gone-it's-gone-it's-gone* meant the transport still, but she knew, blinking up at the ceiling, that it meant the skylight which had blown down in a storm.

She didn't care who the strange girl was, reading a magazine

at the foot of the cot, looking up and saying, "Hullo! Well, thank God!"

She shut her eyes again and heard a voice saying: "Don't be scared. You've been sick, but you're all right now, you're all right now, you're all right now, you're all right *now*, you're all right *NOW*, you're all right *NOW*, you're all right *NOW* . . ."

Something on her forehead was light and cool. She fell asleep.

Waking later, she saw that where she had thought the ceiling had been patched over while she had been asleep was a strange ceiling after all, and there never had been a skylight there.

It was getting dark, but she saw that the wall paper was different too, and the cot had a head and foot.

She thought there had been someone else in the room, but she supposed that had been part of the dreams, for there was no one there now. For a moment she thought the thin arm stretched along the cot's edge belonged to someone else, but when she willed it to lift it obeyed, falling limply back.

She saw then that the two dresses hanging behind the parted faded pink curtains at the foot of the cot were not her own. Bewilderment brought a headache, and she lay back, closing her eyes.

She slept again, feverishly, until the door knob rattled.

A tall thin girl in a shabby fur-collared embroidered jacket came in, carrying a bundle under each arm. She stood against the shut door smiling and said: "Hullo, kiddo! Feeling better?"

The failing light from the one small window fell on her wide white face, showing the blue circles under her eyes and the deep lines around her mouth, but in spite of strain and pallor she was quite beautiful.

She threw her felt hat on the chiffonier and turned on the electric light, and it made of her fair short hair a misty aura about her head.

She came over to the cot quickly and sat on its edge. Her husky voice had the familiar quality of one once heard in a dream.

She said: "Gee, what do you think of me for bringing you to

this rat hole? But you said you didn't have any place or anybody to take care of you, and, God, you were sick!"

She talked hurriedly then: "You don't know anything about me, kiddo—I know. You don't know whether I'm a pickpocket or a white slaver or a Lesbian—or what. But I'm *not* any of those things—see? And you've just got to take my word for it, that's all. In a little while you'll be okay again, and you can beat it and forget all about such a lousy experience. But I couldn't leave you out there starving and sick with flu and all alone. You had to get to bed some place and have a doctor. And this lousy dump was all I had."

Janet said weakly: "It's just about exactly like the one I had. They kicked me out because I didn't have the rent."

"I know—you told me you were broke. So was I. I had one thin dime, that was all."

"*Oh*—oh, I remember now—you were going to——"

"Damn it, I had to spend it for a can of soup for you!"

Janet said after a brief silence: "Well, I guess you saved *my* life. Gosh—it sounds so dumb to say 'thanks.'"

"Oh, forget it. You'd said you wanted to live, so I took your word for it."

Janet asked then: "*Why* were you going to—do what you were——?"

"Just down and out, kiddo," the fair girl said, shrugging. "Didn't you ever get that way—just at the end of things? Rehearsed six weeks without pay, borrowing from everybody. Then the show a flop. A lot of debts, and job all gone to hell. And no more to be landed. It used to be easy—step out of one show and into another. But it gets harder all the time. For the good ones, that is, and I won't take the others. I do look okay from the front still, but they won't believe it across a desk. Maybe I sounded looney in the Square. I was a little bit tight—I'd spent all but the dime for that so as not to get cold feet. But believe me, I wasn't kidding. If it wasn't for you——"

"Where did you get the money for the doctor and the room?"

"I still had the room."

"Well, how about the doctor?"

"Oh, what the hell—I went and got back a job I'd walked out on—burlesque——"

"But——"

"Oh, hell, somebody had to take care of you, babe."

The fair girl took a bottle of milk from one of the paper bags and set it on the chiffonier. Out of the other bag she took a plate with another plate turned over it.

"Poached egg on toast to-night. How's that sound?"

"Gosh," Janet whispered, "I'll pay you back some day."

"Never mind about that. Say, what's your name anyhow? . . . Oh, yeah? Mine's Swanson. Vivian Swanson. Born Svenn-sen. Swanson on the programs, though. Call me Viv."

"You can call me Jan."

"Okay, Jan. Cute name. Sit up, now—lean forward a little. How's that? Comfy? Feel stronger now?"

"Yes, a lot better."

"Oh, you'll be okay now. Pretty weak still for a couple of days, the doctor said, but nothing to worry about any more. Gee, you've been a sick kid, though. Flu—did you know that was what was the matter with you? A rotten case of it from staying out in the cold, and no resistance on account of not eating for a couple of days. Oh, you've had a swell time. But you'll be okay now—up in a couple of days. Then you can go some place decent."

"I haven't any place to go."

"That's all right, we'll find you a place. Say, we'll get your stuff too. Didn't you say the big bums kept your trunk?"

"Yes—I was a week behind on rent, besides."

"Say, where did you say you were living?"

"Charles Street."

"Yeah? That's right near. This is Perry. You don't want to go back there?"

"No!"

"I don't blame you. I guess it's noisy as hell over there too. Damn those brats in the street. Here, want some more salt? Say, what were you doing, kiddo—were you working some place? Tell me to shut up——"

"I was taking an art course. I was getting along all right, but my money ran out. I had a month more—it was just a four months' course."

"Gee, that was a shame."

"But I'll go back. I'll get some kind of a job nights, I guess, and go back. I'll work in a restaurant, I guess, or something."

"Sure, you've got to finish."

"Sure, then I can get a decent job. And then I'll be really starting."

"Starting?"

"Yes—living my own life."

The fair girl said, laughing: "God—I used to use those words myself."

"So far it's been—so—so—lonely."

"Yeah, I know."

"All I've done is work. And walk and walk. And go for bus rides sometimes, even if I couldn't afford it."

"Sure, I know."

"Sometimes I thought I was going crazy from just being alone so. Then I'd get out and walk and walk a long way and so fast that I'd come back to my room so tired I'd go right to sleep instead of lying awake by myself."

"God, I know," Viv said.

"It was the first time I'd ever been alone in my life, you see. Really alone. I guess you get used to it after a while."

Viv said: "I asked you about your people that night, but I couldn't get very well what you said. You didn't say they were dead?"

"Oh, no. I guess I told you they'd gone to Panama. They're army. They sailed the middle of December. Two weeks before—that night. What's the date now? How long have I been sick?"

"To-day's January eighth. You've been sick nine days."

"Gosh, it seems forever. It seems years ago that they sailed. They left from here—Brooklyn, that is. I went to see them off. Gosh, dying must be sort of like watching a transport sail—whether there's anyone on board you know or not. The band plays God Be With You Till We Meet Again."

"Well, for crying out loud, babe—didn't they know you were broke?"

"But I wasn't broke yet—not quite! And, anyway, I told them I had plenty still—I didn't want to worry them. I meant to get a job nights, anyhow, as soon as my money ran out. But

I don't know what happened—it ran out so much sooner than I'd figured on, and I tried for three days to find a job of any kind, but I couldn't find anything. I'd been looking that day too."

"Gee, you poor kid. Why in hell didn't you wire your family then when you got so damn desperate?"

"Because I kept thinking I *would* get a job any minute, and I didn't want to worry them! I wouldn't have had the money anyhow to wire clear to there."

"And did you say," Viv asked, combing her fair hair now before the chiffonier's warped glass, "that they're all—there isn't anyone else?"

"No—I mean yes, I did say so—if you asked me. I mean—there isn't."

"Not even—a boy-friend?"

"No."

"Tell me to shut up, if you mind. I just wondered."

"That's all right."

"Gee, you're tired, babe," Viv cried. "Gee, I shouldn't have let you talk all this—God, the doctor'd have kittens. You go on to sleep again, will you, kiddo? I'll go on out and get my dinner, and I'll be quiet when I come in and try not to wake you up."

Janet asked then: "Viv—where do you sleep?"

"Oh—there's a couch downstairs."

"Then why did you say you'd be quiet when you came in?"

"Oh, hell, kiddo—don't worry about me, will you?"

"Viv! Are you sleeping sitting up in that awful chair?"

"Gee, what's it to you?"

They looked at each other.

"Gosh, I never *thought* before. Gosh, Viv——"

"Oh, for crying out loud, I've slept on park benches."

"Well, to-night you sleep up here! I'll wake up and make you do it! I'm well now—you won't catch my flu."

"I wasn't afraid of that."

They looked at each other a long time.

"Gosh—*why* should you have been so damn good to me?"

"Oh, boloney."

Janet lay in the dark alone, listening to the diminuenda of descending footfalls on the hall stairs.

§ 3

AT EIGHTH STREET she got off the bus and ran through the stinging sleet. A taxi driver cruising on Sixth Avenue said, "Hello, Mabel." She ran on up Christopher and turned into a little single block like a half moon, slacking her pace at last to a walk.

There was a light in the shallow windows of a top floor, and she caught her breath in a short sob.

She fitted a key to the lock of an ancient pale green paneled street door under a wrought-iron lantern and let herself into a little queer-odored hallway and went up a narrow leaning flight of stairs, trudging, clinging to a crooked banister.

At the top of the second flight she unlocked another paneled apple-green door and went through, closing it behind her.

A husky sleepy voice said: "Hullo, babe."

"Hello," she answered, feeling the first near-peace of the long day and the drudging night become morning an hour before.

"Gee, you look tired."

"I am. Gosh, it's good to be home."

"It is home, isn't it? After that rat hole of mine."

"It's too good to be true."

"A little bare yet, but never mind, we'll get junk by degrees."

The fair girl at the fireplace pulled a second chair up to the gas logs. "Get warm. Here, I brought you a hot chocolate—I knew you'd be cold. It's been keeping hot by the gas."

"Oh, thanks—but haven't I told you not to spend——"

"Shut up. Here's your favorite tongue-on-rye and a hunk of cheese cake."

"Viv! It doesn't do any good to tell you——"

"Nope. Here, take the plate—I just swept up. You've got to eat and get fat again."

"But, gosh, I owe you so damn much already."

"You don't owe me anything. Shut up."

"We couldn't even have got the apartment if you weren't posing too, and I know how you hate it."

"Well, you don't owe me anything. Get that out of your head. I owe you."

"For what, I'd like to know!"

"The will to stick around a little longer, for instance."

"You saved *my* life!"

"Then we're square."

They sat back, staring into the meager glow of the pseudo logs.

"I keep wondering," Janet said, "what would have happened if you—hadn't happened to come along when you did."

"You'd have had D. T.'s in the public square, that's all."

"I mean—aside from that. If we hadn't decided to live together. If I'd had to keep going on—alone."

"You'd have gone on."

"Gosh, I don't know. I—looking back now, I think I might have felt like doing what you were going to do."

"Shut up. You're too young to talk like that."

"But you don't know how unhappy I was!"

"Why?"

"Oh, just—circumstances."

They stared into the logs.

Viv asked softly: "You aren't such a hell of a lot happier yet, are you, babe?"

"Why—sure. Of course I am."

She asked then, not looking up from the logs: "What made you think I'm not?"

"Oh, I didn't know. Just guessing. It's my favorite sport."

"I'm just so tired all the time," she said. "It'll be different when I once get a chance to start getting a little kick out of life."

"Gee, kiddo, if you'd only let me help out a little bit—then you wouldn't have to——"

"What do you think you are doing, posing besides the show, and paying more than your share on everything?"

"But you could pay me back when you get on your feet."

"I am going to pay you back! But I've got plenty to pay back now—I don't want any more. I hate borrowing—even from you. Anyway, I want success bad enough to work hard for it. I don't really mind being tired now—it won't be for long. Gosh, the only thing that seems worth while in the world—now—is getting a *real* job, so I can really start."

"You aren't going to pull that live-my-own-life hooley again, are you, kiddo?"

"Well, I don't care—call it whatever you want! I want to have some liberty to get out and play around—I've got things to try and forget, and work doesn't seem to make me do it. Not carrying ham and eggs to a lot of saps that try to make dates with me, and not school either. I thought school would—but I know a *real* job will because it's what I've been looking forward to for years, and specially the being free at last to play around however I want to where I don't have to mind what people will say!"

"Who are you going to play around with?"

"Oh, several of the kids at the Academy have asked me to parties. There're a couple of boys that live on Christopher Street—I told them I'd come when I finished my course and wasn't so tired all day."

"Why do you have to work so hard at home," Viv asked, "days there's no school?"

"Because my course is so short—I have to study and practise every minute."

"Gee, kiddo, you've got guts."

"I've got an ideal."

"God, what's that?"

"What makes you talk so damn bitterly, Viv?"

"I'm twenty-nine."

"But that's not old."

"It is in New York—in my business."

"But why did you lose your ambition? You said you had it first. Why couldn't you have got somewhere on the stage? You're so pretty."

"Used to be, maybe. But pretty isn't everything. It takes a hell of a lot more. A voice, for one thing—not a croak. Oh, I wised up. I got wise early in the game it was the chorus for mine. And just so long of that. You're good for just so many years, and I knew when I was through."

"But you're not through! You've got a big show now!"

"Yeah—for how long? Till it flops. Look at the notices."

They sat silent again.

"Gee, kiddo," Viv said, "I'm a hell of a friend to pull this

line on you. But it don't mean anything to you. I mean you're you and you're young and you've got something. You'll get ahead—there's nothing holding you back."

The gas flames lapped around the logs.

"We shouldn't stay up so late—gas is expensive."

"I said the gas and light are my treat, babe."

"Well, they aren't."

"We'll fight it out when the bills come."

Janet said, yawning: "I've got to go sketch dresses on the Avenue to-morrow morning."

"We'll go to bed, then. I put the hot-water bag in your bed. It ought to be good and comfy by now."

"Gosh, will you ever put it in your own bed?"

"Nope. I told you I got scalded by one when I was a baby and haven't had any use for the damn things since."

§ 4

SHE found her way through a large room where a dozen men and women sat sketching at little tables, to a smaller room where a pale young man with thinning brown hair sat behind a desk.

"Are you Mr. Gregory Sandford?"

"Yes, I am. Won't you sit down?"

The pale young man's smile was pleasant and friendly: like the sudden coming out of the sun on a rainy day.

"Was it about the designing position?"

"Yes. Mr. Minette sent me."

"Oh, yes—Miss Custis! I have his letter. He said some very nice things. I don't believe he said, though, how much school you've had. How long have you been studying?"

"Well—four months."

"Four months? That's not very long."

"I know, but Mr. Minette thinks——"

"Well, Mr. Minette generally thinks correctly. He's sent us a number of his people. They've all done well. The trouble is they leave us for higher salaries. We pay as much as we consider fair for the effort we require."

"How much?"

"Why, we can start you at thirty-five."

"Well—I think I'd like to start——"

"And leave us too?"

"I don't know," she said, smiling back.

"Well, all right, suppose you do start, then," he said, getting up. "Stay to-day, and we'll see what you can do. We do want young people with fresh ideas. Come along, we'll find you a table."

A few minutes later she sat by a window, looking down into the slush-piled street.

This is *it*, she told her unquickened heart. This is *it*. You've almost won.

She set her pencil to the white sheet tacked to her board and began sketching with strokes as even as her dispassionate pulses.

A new thin snow was falling to the old muddy masses in the gutters.

Three canopied busses came, and she waited still, hailing an uncovered one at last and climbing to its deserted top to sit alone on a wet seat, shivering in the new cold come with the afternoon's waning light.

Crying out over the noises of the city, her mind chanted: You've won! You've won! You've won!

Her face, bared of scarf and coat collar, was upturned to the snow, and the blowing flakes melting on her cheeks ran down, mingling with the unstanchable unrejoicing tears.

SHE had been staring vacantly at Viv's hands flickering in the suds of the dishes in the wash bowl beyond the little window between the bathroom and the tiny corner that was the kitchen, and Viv's face leaning down startled her.

"What's the matter, babe—don't you feel like going?"

"Sure—I'm just resting."

"How's work going nowadays? You haven't mentioned it lately."

"All right."

"Gee, I don't see how you can keep a steady hand for drawing, hitting the pace you do."

"What do you think I'm doing—fine art?"

"Well, I just thought——"

"You don't have to be so precise in design sketching."

"I should just think you'd be tired in the office, getting in late and getting up so early."

"Well, what do you expect me to do—stay home *because* I've got a job now? I got a job so I *could* have some fun—gosh, I went long enough without any."

"And are you having fun?"

"Of course!"

The dishes clattered gently onto the shelf table on the kitchen side of the low window.

"I'll dry them."

"Oh, don't bother, babe. You go on and rest."

"I'm rested now."

"Say, no fooling, kiddo, if you'd rather not go I'll go call them up. Wouldn't you rather stay home and get caught up on sleep?"

"No, I want to go, I tell you!"

They finished the dishes together and got dressed.

The man holding her hand under the table on his fat unquiet knee was quite drunk and kept whispering ribald comments in her ear about the dancing chorus on the floor.

The dancing chorus was dun-skinned, with large red lips and joggling breasts under the scarlet brassières that made their costume along with the scarlet tights that showed the flesh of their brown buttocks above their prancing thighs.

White men were leaning over their tables leering. The man beside her was pouring more whisky, and a glass upset.

The other man and Viv were quarreling. Viv's voice was husky and low, but the man's was a sharp unpleasant whine.

At the next table a girl's skirt was pulled up and a man's hairy hand was kneading her bare leg.

Brown-and-scarlet bodies wiggled away, and between the tables a drunken white man pinched a brown girl's naked side.

Viv and her man got up to dance. Brown bodies and black bodies and white bodies bumped and sweated. A white man got up, bowing to a yellow girl, and she slapped her escort's black face and moved into the crush with the white man, cheek to cheek.

The man with Janet drained a whisky glass and the liquor ran down his chin. Viv's partner, following her back to the table, was whining: "What's the idea of turning virtuous?"

The slapped black man left, cursing. After a little while the yellow girl and her white man went out together, his fingers under her arm caressing her breast.

§ 2

WISPS of red wool from the mop caught in the snags of the old wide boards of the painted floor, and Viv stooped to loosen them.

"I wish to God you'd stay in and get some sleep."

"Oh, and I wish you'd quit trying to run me! I didn't come to New York to be——"

"I'm not trying to run you, babe. What you do is up to you. But I think you're kidding yourself."

"About what?"

"About this living-your-own-life game."

"Well, why should you worry?"

"Because I want to see you happy, and I know you aren't!"

"I am! What do you know about it?"

"About happiness?" Viv said. "Maybe you're right—not much."

Viv said then to the fluttering hands at the bathroom wash-bowl: "You said you had an ideal. I thought you meant your work. Getting somewhere."

"I did! So I can be free to live my—to live as I please without being bothered by convention and gossip! I've got that now—why should I work for anything more?"

"You had ideals too when you landed here. You'll be losing them—if you haven't already."

"Well, I haven't! Why should I?"

"Oh, how can you help it, babe, bumming around with that lousy Christopher Street crew? Gee, for God's sake, what do you see in them? What the hell are you after, anyway?" Viv cried then, watching the nervous pantomime of the hands at the basin: "Babe, talk to me, will you? You never will—you just shut up as if you didn't trust me."

Janet came out. "Oh, please shut up, Viv. There isn't anything to talk about. Please just let me alone! I'd talk if there was anything to talk about. I just want to be left alone."

She put on her coat and buttoned its collar around her throat.

At the door to the hall she said: "You better not wait up."

"Excuse me, will you, kiddo?" Viv said huskily. "I didn't mean to make you sore. I just—I just do want to see you happy."

"Good-night." She went out, letting the door click after her.

She knew that Viv was standing with her mop still, unmoving, listening to her footsteps dying down the uncarpeted stairs.

She told herself, watching them: "They're my kind. They're living their own lives too. They're the reason I went hungry and got sick and worked day and night. They're the goal, reached at last."

The boy sitting beside her on the couch asked: "Are you a virgin?"

"No."

The couple lying behind them were crowding them off. The boy said, "Hey!" and pulled their drunken faces apart.

"Why the hell don't you go upstairs? Go on, beat it!"

He pushed them on the floor, and they got up, staggering, and dragged each other up the narrow staircase to the balcony, disappearing behind a curtain outlined by a dim blue light.

Outside the long translucent studio windows above the balcony's narrow continuation overhead, shadows passed in ghostly parade, pausing sometimes briefly, distorted in the pale light, and moving on.

The heat died down, and cellar dampness clung to the plaster walls in spite of the glow from the hearth.

The boy beside her went to the kitchenette under the balcony and returned with their glasses refilled. She was shivering and drank. He pulled her close to him and kissed her; his drink held above them spilled on her dress.

Voices shrilled across the room above the phonograph and the stamping and scuffling.

The boy was whispering: "Come on upstairs."

She shook her head, prisoning his hand against her side.

Knocking on the street door above hushed the shouting. A girl ran up and peered through a little window behind a grating; she flung the door back then, and a girl and two men came through, trudging slush onto the balcony.

There was whispering below.

"It's Maida and her fairies! She promised to get 'em here!"

The blond newcomers, one slight and one burly, were led to the bar. The shouting flung back and forth again.

"Hey, when's your husband coming to see you, Diz?"

"I headed him off—I'm not incestuous!"

"Diz was afraid she'd disgrace the community and have a legitimate child!"

A drunken girl was taken up to the bathroom and the crowd mimicked her vomiting. She came out, held up by the man with her, and he took her into an unoccupied bedroom and turned out the dim light.

The boy whispered: "Come on up—come on. They'll have the other room in a minute."

She shook her head, avoiding his seeking mouth.

"You're cold. I'd keep you warm."

She shook her head again, and he held her drink for her to finish and took her glass to the kitchen.

The couple who had retired first came down the stairs and had another drink. Hilarity was giving way to stupor. Two couples sprawled on the far couch in drunken intimacy. Someone put out the lights, and the blue glow from the abandoned bedroom hung like a pale tapestry, throwing a cold ghostly pallor over the lower room.

The heavier of the blond newcomers was in the kitchen looking for more liquor. The slight one got up and sat beside a girl on the floor before the fire.

The shouts were quieter now.

"Did you get a job yet, Marcia?"

"No, I've decided to be kept. Pete's going to keep me."

"Yeah—as soon as I can find some nice old lady to keep *me*."

The blond boy and the girl hitched closer and kissed. Titters rose, but the two were oblivious; there were nudgings in the dark.

The blond boy glanced warily toward the kitchen and whispered in the girl's ear. They got up and went quickly, hand in hand, up the stairs to the room at the end, shutting away with the curtain the ghostly blue.

Someone whispered: "Why, the old bisexual nymphomaniac!"

The light from the kitchen lit the big basement room dimly. The other blond youth came out and his eyes searched the group. Someone said: "He went upstairs," and the crowd stirred.

Setting down his drinks, the blond fellow went up, grimly, and said, "Pardon me," at the first bedroom. The middle room was empty, and he tore back the curtains blotting away the blue light.

He cried out in anguished rage: "Oh, you damned bitch!" and wheeled into the middle room, and his wild sobs coming out of the dark chilled the tittering crowd below.

The girl who had come with the pair ran up the stairs. Her voice came over the railing, crooning and frightened.

The sobbing boy screamed: "Get that filthy girl out of there, or I'll kill her, I swear I will!"

The crowd was creeping up the stairs. Someone whispered: "Put her out the window! Out into the court!"

Two young men went into the room with the blue light; their rasping whispers came along the balcony.

"Out the window, Dolly—get your dress on, quick!"

A girl's whining defiance rose and shut off abruptly, gurgling. In the middle room three figures in the dark were clamping the screaming boy to the bed.

A window creaked up . . . and down. Feet outside ran on the concrete.

The young men came out of the blue-lit room perspiring; the ones in the middle room kept saying: "Hey, she's gone! She's gone!"

There was a blow in the dark and spewed obscenities. Then the pounding of a stick on the street door, and a roaring voice saying: "Open up! Open up or we'll break in!"

Someone gasped, "Cops!" and a hand grasped Janet's, jerking her through the dark. A window ripped up again, and she fell through, sprawling onto concrete.

A whisper said, "Come on—this way!" and she was dragged by the hand crushing hers over sidewalk and grass and down short steps through a doorway and along a dim hall through another door and up more steps out to a street.

"Run!" . . . and pulled and falling, she followed again along the shadows of houses. A voice shouted, "Taxi!" and a roughness stung her cheek, and crying and laughing she lay on her face on a cab floor.

Hands pulled her to the seat, and she put her face in her hands and sobbed.

The taxi stopped at a curb; she stared out.

"Come on, sweetheart."

Hands pulled her out.

"Where are we?"

"Morton Street."

"But I want to go home!"

She cried, "Wait!" to the taxi, and sprang back.

"Say, what's the idea? You're coming in with me!"

She struck him across the face, and he caught her by the arm.

She heard: "Damn you, she's my wife!" . . . then: "You're a liar, fella—git in, lady."

She threw herself into the taxi, slamming the door on an epithet from the curb. The taxi sped away.

"Where to, miss?"

"Gay Street——" she gasped.

She lay back weakly, too beaten to cry any more, the bumps of Seventh Avenue jogging her head forward on her breast.

§ 3

MARCH was blustering up the street below, and the drab city was melancholy.

Gregory Sandford stopped at her table. "Will you come into my office a minute, Miss Custis?"

She followed him, and he closed the door gently behind them; they looked at each other across his desk.

"What's the trouble, Janet?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't hedge. What's the matter with your work?"

"I didn't know——"

"Yes, you did. I've watched you drawing. You've known, all right—you've been killing yourself with effort."

"Well—I—my ideas——"

"Exactly. They haven't the old snap. You used to draw dress after dress without thinking. Good dresses too—makable, salable dresses. Now you sit and fret and worry and drop design after design into your waste basket. What's the trouble?"

She sighed: "Oh, I guess I'm just—stale. The ideas just don't seem to come any more."

The crowd coming out of the subway met the wind, and dirt blew in their faces. They drew into their coat collars and scattered down the dirt-swept streets that diverged like spokes from their hub, Sheridan Square. She thought of their disunion as symbolizing the inexorable transiency of all human contact.

Dirt spiraling in a cloud stung her eyes; she pressed on, eyes streaming, toward Bleecker Street.

Callow voices spoke out of a group on a corner:

"Hello, Alice."

"Yes, sir! That's my baby!"

"Oh, ain't she sweet!"

A ragamuffin with a running nose mumbled an obscenity in passing. She looked away into the wind, and dirt blew in her face again.

She went into a store on Bleeker and bought a piece of oilcloth and went out, continuing south. A gaunt cat with shriveled swinging teats slunk out of a doorway, and a child kicked at it. On Grove Street foul-mouthed hoodlums were wrangling and she crossed to avoid them. The patch of sod at Sheridan Square was a dying thing, its gray brittle shrubs bowed in desperate supplication to the necrophagous wind. Off its sidewalks stained newspapers rose, swirling, and beat in its iron fence like impaled birds.

She turned into Gay Street from Waverley Place. Someone was cooking onions on the first floor, the reek mingling nauseously with the musty odor of the aged halls. She put her handkerchief to her nose and climbed the sagging stairs.

Viv was getting dinner. "Hullo, babe. Gee, I thought you got lost."

"I stayed to talk to Gregory. Then I went for the oilcloth."

"Oh. Gee, I was beginning to worry about you."

She went into the tiny kitchen, squeezing against the ice box.

"What can I do?"

"Here, peel these."

She took the potatoes and a bowl out to the chair by the gas logs.

"Viv——"

"Yeah?"

"What can they do to you if you break a lease?"

Viv, coming to the kitchen door, stopped stirring. "What for, kiddo?"

"Let's—let's move uptown."

"Oh." Viv stirred in her bowl again.

"Are rents much higher?"

"Not much. Not if you look around. But, gee, babe, you've got sick of the Village quick."

"I know. I see it all different now."

"I knew you would. I didn't know you would so soon, though. Everybody does sooner or later. I did too when I lived here."

"What did you let us stay for, then?"

"Well, you wanted to stay—I knew I couldn't sell you on anything else then."

Janet said: "They don't really sue you if you break a lease, do they?"

"Hell, no. They couldn't us anyway—we've both got different business addresses than when we moved in. They'd never bother anyway—they knew we were just about broke. They probably wouldn't have let us in at all if it wasn't 'way after renting season. We could get all two of our pieces of furniture out at night."

"Could we?"

"Sure. Easy."

"Then let's look uptown to-morrow. Gregory'll let me off a while."

"Okay, kiddo. I'll go out and get a paper after dinner and we'll look at the ads."

The house was a brownstone front like all the others in the block. The street was wide and clean and free of shouting children.

The stairs inside were new clean wood, bare and still unvarnished; the walls had been freshly painted a mottled green.

On the last floor they leaned against the stair railing, exhausted from the long climb. Viv touched the bell.

A large woman with black hair cut like a man's and plastered to her head opened the door.

"Ah, come in. The little girls about the apartment, isn't it?"

Viv said: "Yes, we phoned."

"Come right in and have a look around."

The big room beyond a small vestibule was furnished with a heavy masculine simplicity. There were plain brown drapes with no under curtains, and a Morris chair and a couch without cushions, and several smoking stands. On one stand was a green decanter full of liquor, and a small tray of green glasses.

The woman took them into a smaller bedroom done in the

same severe style and into a glistening white and green bathroom and into a well equipped kitchenette of adequate size.

"It's nice," Janet said, and Viv nodded.

A man's dressing gown hung on a hook in one of the two closets.

Janet said: "We've been walking our feet off all afternoon. There always seems to be something wrong with every place."

"Sit down," the woman said cordially. "Talk it over together. Here, have a bracer! Pardon my thoughtlessness."

She poured two glasses full, briskly.

"Gee, I'm so tired," Viv said, "I believe I will."

"Not so much for me, please," Janet said.

The woman told them: "Use just as much as you want. But you'll like it, I know. It's a rather special brandy. Personally, I never spoil it with a mixer, but I have both White Rock and ginger ale if you wish."

"I'd just as soon have mine straight," Viv said, and Janet said, "I would too."

The woman strode from the room, smiling back with her black piercing eyes, the contours of her muscular calves showing through her tight tweed skirt.

"I'll have the next with you. I'll leave you to talk things over by yourselves."

She shut the door of the bedroom, and they heard her heavy steps behind the wall.

"Isn't she funny?" Janet whispered.

"She's a Lesbian—and how!"

"I thought so. I want to stare and stare at her."

Viv sniffed her drink. "Smells okay."

In a little while the woman came back. "And what's the word?"

"Sold," Viv said.

"Fine. I know you'll be satisfied. I'll have the lease turned right over to you."

She refilled their glasses, taking one for herself from the tray and passing gold-tipped cigarettes.

"This is swell stuff," Viv said warmly.

"Glad you like it. It is rather special."

Her full large lips took her own liquor in three gulps. She

talked on about the advantages of the apartment, refilling her glass.

"Some people claim that good liquor is best enjoyed slowly. I don't agree."

"Thanks, I've still got some."

"Not just yet," Viv said.

The woman talked on, volubly, her black eyes brightening. Janet straightened her skirt over her crossed legs.

The brandy was imparting a strange glow. She thought Viv's eyes looked queerly, but her own were focusing imperfectly, and she couldn't be sure.

She thought: How dumb to get tight on two drinks.

The woman was taking up the bottle again; Viv held out her glass.

She thought: Oh, well, Viv'll stay sober anyway. And let her own be filled.

The woman began her third drink. She was not talking about the apartment now; she appeared to have forgotten about it. Her low tone had the inflection of intelligence, but her words seemed meaningless. She was talking about rapture on a hillside. Then about God at the foot of the sea. She was talking mostly to Janet, and it seemed that one had to keep clinging to her black eyes or fall to death from a great height.

Viv got up, leaning on the arm of her chair.

"Excuse me a minute," she said, and went unsteadily to the bathroom.

The black eyes came nearer all at once, rushing to magnification like a close-up on a moving-picture screen, and the insane words that had filled the room were in Janet's ear. She tried to cry, "Don't! Don't!" But her voice was throttled away by a terrible kiss, and when the hot mad lips went down her neck and shoulder a hand covered her mouth.

She fought with all the strength of her old active years, but the strange liquor was running through her muscles and she was fighting then against unconsciousness, desperately.

The sound of a fierce hoarse scream roused her, and she fell, released, striking her head. There were whirling colors on blackness; then light again. She looked up into the still room.

The woman with the black eyes was lying on the floor, one

heavy arm flung over her breast. Her eyes were closed, and blood was running over them from a wound in her forehead. The green decanter was scattered in a dozen pieces.

Above the prone figure Viv stood, her body sagging. There were long bloody marks on her face.

The silence filling the apartment was the measure of eternity. Janet whispered: "Is she dead?"

"I don't know," Viv said, starting. "Let's get out of here."

They snatched up their coats.

"Can you walk straight?"

"Yes—yes——"

"That stuff was doped. The bitch is a hophead!"

"Oh, hurry—hurry——"

"Listen! When we get to the street, *walk*—don't take a cab. Walk as steady as you can—to the corner—then down to the next block. Then take a cab. And don't run now either. See?"

"Oh, yes—yes——"

They went together, leisurely, down the thunderous, never-ending stairs.

HE said, sitting on the edge of Viv's bed: "I'm going back to school."

"To—to the Academy?"

"Yes."

"Gee—no fooling, babe?"

"Oh, I think maybe that's—the solution."

"But you won't quit work?"

"How could I? I'll take a night class. Life, I think. Maybe I could learn to really draw if I tried hard—if Mr. Minette would let me pay by the week."

"I think it's a swell idea, kiddo. Gee, I'm damn glad."

She lay on her back across Viv's legs, her arms over her eyes.

"But maybe it won't be the solution either—I don't know. Maybe nothing is. If work would be, then why wasn't I gladder when I got my job? That was supposed to be the solution for—years. Almost three years. I'd fought for it and saved for it and then suffered for it—all that time. And when I got it, it didn't mean a thing. I rode downtown on a bus top not caring, crying in the snow—*because* I didn't care—because it was all so flat when I'd thought it was going to be the most glorious thing on earth."

"Oh, babe," Viv said, "you've got to be happy. You're such a damn sweet fine kid."

"Oh, well, don't you worry about it—it'll all work out some way."

"Kiddo—how do you know it's meant to work out in New York?"

"Oh, because—that's all there is—now."

"But why?"

"Because that's the way I've—settled my life."

"But couldn't you unsettle it? If you found out it was wrong after all——"

"But it isn't wrong. Oh, don't let's talk about it. But how

could it be wrong when—when things did work out like they did? When I did get my job so easily—and found you——”

“But suppose you hadn’t found me, though—suppose you were all alone still—would it be just the same?”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you still go on—just because you’d settled your life?”

“But that’s what I say—I *did* find you, so it must prove——”

“But I mean, what if you didn’t have me? Suppose I went away?”

“What?”

“Suppose you didn’t want to live with me any more?”

“But I always would!”

“But suppose you didn’t. Suppose anything happened so you found yourself alone again and lonely like you were at first——”

“Oh, *don’t!*”

“But, babe, listen to me—I want to know! What would you do then—would you stay and go on just the same, or would you—could you unsettle things and go back—wherever you were—or any place else, I mean, where you’d be able to start all over again and maybe be happier than here?”

She rolled on her face on Viv’s covered legs, clutching Viv’s knees.

“Oh, you wouldn’t go away, Viv—you *wouldn’t* leave me—you know I couldn’t get along without you now—gosh, I don’t know what I’d do!”

“Oh, babe darlin’, I’m not going to leave you. I only meant if you—if *you* didn’t want to live with *me* any more—if you found some other girl—somebody at the Academy, maybe, somebody more your own kind. I know I haven’t got a swell education like you——”

“You’re the best girl in the world. There’s only one other I care about as much—I told you about her. You’re better than me—a hundred times.”

“But suppose I wasn’t. I mean, suppose I wasn’t any good at all?”

“Oh, don’t talk like that!”

After a while she said: “I’m going out and call up Mr. Minette

and ask him if he'll let me pay by the week. If he won't, then school's out."

"Sure he will, kiddo. Say, take some money out of my pocket-book and get some butter, and I'll have breakfast ready when you get back."

§ 2

THE class was waiting for the model, and she came finally, a thick young Jewess with bushy hair, wrapped in a soiled cotton kimono, her breasts and buttocks shaking beneath it with her slouching steps.

On her platform under a bright light she pushed off her slippers with her fat toes and, chewing gum inquiringly at the instructor, dropped off her robe.

There was dirt in the creases of her heels and along her ankle tendons and smudging up into the black curling hair on her legs. Networks of broken bloodvessels on her hips and thighs were like great bruises, and her abdomen hung like a pouch from her sides, giving an effect of grotesque symmetry with her pendulous big-nippled breasts.

The director was at his desk.

"Mr. Minette——"

"Oh, come in, Miss Custis—come in."

"Can I talk to you? About the model——"

"The model? Yes? What about her?"

"I—is this the kind of woman that always poses? Will she be the model we have every night?"

"Why, no, we have others, but Miss Grossman is rather the best. She probably will be with us the most. Why? Do you find her difficult to draw?"

"No, but—oh, Mr. Minette, I can't look at women like that—I can't—I can't! I *can't* sit there and stare at her and copy down her ugliness and not have it make me think of everything that's dirty and sordid in the world—I can't!"

"My dear girl! How ridiculous! Why, the artist doesn't think of flesh in terms of morality—the human body is to him simply a medium for the interpretation of his art!"

"But I thought art was beauty—not vileness! I wanted to learn to draw from lovely bodies—the kind the fashion artists make! I thought that was how it would be!"

"But the fashion figure is not the normal figure, my dear. There is no figure in the world, however perfect, possessing the proportions of the style drawing. And the principle of anatomy is to learn the lines of the normal figure in order to conventionalize it. Don't you see?"

"But this isn't a normal figure! It's a caricature!"

"Ah, that too is our principle of instruction. To teach the contours exaggerated for the sake of impression on the mind. Now, my girl, run along and forget such childish nonsense. Go back to your desk and study hard."

She stood before him, her head thrown back.

"No, Mr. Minette, I'm not going back. Not as long as she's in there. If she's the kind of woman I've got to look at and draw I don't want the course!"

"Now, Miss Custis. Now—now, this is childishness! This is absurd! Really, I can't believe that a sensible young woman like you would voice such unprofessional views! The truth is that you have ability, my girl—decided talent in design and definite ability in drawing. Are you going to allow such a silly, absurd attitude to rob you of success in a wider field?"

She said miserably: "I can't help it. I've got to, if this is what I have to study to get there. I can't help it—it's how I feel! Oh, I've looked at too much ugliness lately—I can't stand any more! I feel sick looking at that woman. It makes me feel ashamed myself—for having a woman's body too!"

The director turned to his papers on his desk. "Then I presume we have nothing more to say to each other, Miss Custis."

Outside in the hall she took her coat and hat from a hook and went down the stairs and out into the lighted street.

She turned into Fifth Avenue and walked swiftly for several blocks, buffeted by the night crowds and the wind.

At Fifty-seventh Street she took a bus and sat above in the wind and chill and rode for two hours past the black river and up into the city again, and back along the river and across once

more to the bright Avenue and past its somber downtown houses into the Square.

She got out then and walked to Macdougall Street, and took another path back and crossed to the park's farther area, where she had first seen Viv's white face, and sought out the same grotesque tree.

She shrank into the shadows as two young men passed arm in arm, absorbed in their own soft caressing laughter. She shuddered in the wind and thought: If she were here to-night and said, "I don't want to go alone," I might say, "All right, you needn't."

She sat huddled in her coat, head on her arms on the back of the bench, until the yellow cross at the south went out, leaving the shivering stars.

After a while she got up and traversed the Square once more. The old brick houses to the north were venerable ghosts, staid in untroubled sleep.

She thought Viv, sitting by the gas logs, was asleep, until Viv raised her face.

"Hullo, babe."

"Hello."

"Where the hell were you? I thought you were never coming home!"

"I took a bus ride."

"Oh."

She knew from Viv's eyes that she was half drunk. Viv got up unsteadily and went to the mantel, where there was a bottle of gin and a glass.

"Want a drink?"

"Where'd you get that?"

"Stopped and bought it on the way home. Have some?"

"No, thanks."

Viv poured her glass full and drained it, standing against the mantel, looking at Janet with strange eyes.

In her own small room behind the kitchen and bath Janet lay down on her couch-bed in the dark.

She heard Viv come to the door.

"Say, babe——"

"What?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead."

"What's the matter? Are you sore?"

"What's the idea of drinking by yourself?"

"You won't drink with me."

"Well, I mean why are you drinking at all?"

"Felt like it. Why should you care?"

"Oh, I don't," she said, turning her face into her pillow.

"Babe," Viv said in her husky voice, "I got things to tell you. Babe—I'm rotten."

Viv said then: "You got a right to know. I ought to have told you before, but I—couldn't. I was afraid you wouldn't want to live with me. I'm just a rotten bum, babe. I—I've been sleeping with men ever since I came to New York."

She went on: "I don't know if you thought I was a virgin or not. You never asked. If you had I guess I'd have lied, because—I was afraid to let you know. I never knew anyone like you, and I—I wanted you to like me too. I wouldn't ever have asked you to live with me, but when you did—why, I couldn't help it, I wanted to so much. If it hadn't been for you I'd have gone on and done what I was going to—in the Square."

She said then: "But, anyway, I want to tell you now. You got a right to know. Babe, I'm rotten. I'm a part of all the rottenness you've found here in this rotten dump. Honest to God, I was good when I came here—when I came to live my own life, just like you. Then I was so God-damn lonely. Oh, God, that was why I wanted to stick around and take care of you. I didn't want it to get you like it did me. I couldn't stand it finally, and I just gave in. Fellows kept trying to make dates after the show, and I met them too when I was around with the other girls. It was the nights I hated worst—even after a party I hated getting home and being alone. So then I started not being. That was how it was, honest to God. Then after that I guess I just lost all the moral sense I had. I thought I *was* living my own life then. Whenever my conscience bothered me I just took another drink. And after a while it quit bothering me. Except—the only way it showed still was when I thought about my mother. She was

the only thing left that made me ashamed. So I quit writing to her. Just quit writing to her and kept on. Then I met you—and you were so different. You made me want to be straight like you. And I have been straight all this time we've lived together—you can't help but know that. But anyway, that don't change the past any. And I made up my mind at last I wasn't playing straight after all—as long as I didn't let you know—because you got a *right* to know."

There was a horse's head on the ceiling where the light from the other room jetted on the yellow plaster's lumps and shadows.

"I'll go away," Viv said. "You won't want to live with me any more now. I'll get out to-morrow. We'll break the lease, and you can go some place else. You'll never have to see me again."

Then Viv was sobbing. "I never took any money, though! I swear to God I never did any selling my body! I never took a cent in my life from anyone! I just couldn't stand being lonely, that was all!"

Janet went across the room in the dark and felt in the closet for the familiar fabric of her coat.

"Wh-where you going?"

"Out."

"W-will you be back?"

"Sure. After a while."

She went along the little hallway quietly and heard Viv's sobbing moan and the creaking of the couch springs under her drooping body as the door into the outside hall opened and closed.

The restaurant in Sheridan Square was full of drunken Villagers: a typical Saturday night crowd. She made a phone call to friends put out of mind for ten days and went out, stepping aside as a girl asleep on a man's lap at a table lurched and vomited on the floor.

Christopher Street was deserted. A mangy tom slinking on a basement stair turned a scarred face in which all the evils of humanity were incorporate. Beyond Bleecker a drunk slumped

to the sidewalk, and a policeman kicked his muddy legs into the shadow of a garbage can and strolled on.

A carload of drunken rowdies skidding out of a cross street shouted.

"Hello, May!"

"Oh, Ru-uth!"

"Want a ride?"

They drove on, singing obscenities. Through long translucent windows a narrow balcony showed, and below it indistinguishable shadows milled in a queer thick light.

She went down steps and rapped out a code letter with the wrought-iron knocker. Feet came running up a flight inside, and a face appeared at the small window behind the iron grating.

"Well, for Gawd's sake! Hey, boys and girls, guess who's come back to the fold!"

The door swung back.

§ 3

THE cold early sunlight came into the room in a thin spout, haloing a crushed roach on the floor.

Viv's white face, asleep, was grimacing as though in pain.

"Viv——"

She dropped to the bed edge and said again: "Viv——"

Bloodshot eyes opened upon her, startled.

Janet said: "Viv—I'm an adulteress."

Viv pressed her face into the pillow and moaned. "Oh, babe—why in the hell did you?"

The sunlight was making a tinted pattern of the crushed roach's vitals.

Viv said: "I tried so damn hard to keep you safe—I knew this damn town would get you, with you feeling the way you did."

"Oh, Viv, never mind—don't cry."

"That was why I told you about me! To make you hate me so you'd go away—some place where you'd have a chance to keep straight and be happy!"

"Oh, well, please don't cry so—I'm not worth it."

"I didn't mean it to work this way! Oh, God, now I feel as if I was to blame instead!"

"No, you weren't, Viv. I didn't mean to when I went out—honest. I just felt so awful I wanted to go some place and get tight. But, Viv, listen—I *was* meaning to, I think, before you ever told me anything at all. I—oh, honest, I think I'd been sort of planning to——"

"Planning?"

"I think I thought then I'd be sure not to go back to my husband!"

"Oh, babe—God forgive you, poor crazy little kid!"

"I just felt myself slipping so—back to him—and I knew I shouldn't go!"

"But that was what I meant you to do when I told you—when I told you about me! Babe, I swear to God in heaven I meant it to make you leave me and go back to him!"

"To—to who?"

"Your husband!"

"But you didn't know——"

"Yes, I did, kiddo—gee, I've known all the time! You told me yourself when we were in that lousy hole in Perry Street!"

"I didn't!"

"When you were sick, babe! When you were delirious! Oh, God, you didn't mean to tell me—you didn't even know I was there, I guess, and I tried to shut you up—honest to God I did, because I didn't want to listen to your private business when you didn't know what you were saying! But you wouldn't shut up, and the doctor said not to leave you—you were so sick, and I didn't dare—I'm sorry, babe—God, I couldn't even stop up my ears, I was so busy trying to keep you quiet so you wouldn't hurt yourself!"

"Oh, never mind, Viv—it's all right."

"You know how I've tried to get you to tell me since, of your own will—to make it right. But you never would, and I felt sneaking and rotten, specially when it seemed like you didn't trust me to know——"

"Oh, it wasn't that, Viv. I just couldn't talk about it—I was trying so hard to forget about him and get to be part of New

York—I wouldn't even let him write—I knew it was best for both of us."

She said then: "I was sort of numb when I left, and that's how I could leave, no matter how he did. He cried and begged me not to go for good, but I'd made up my mind before—and I thought I knew it was best——"

She put her hands out to the wall, and Viv caught her slipping arms.

"Sit down, babe! Gee, you're all weak. Here, lie down here with me and rest."

She moaned: "Oh, I've got such a hangover. Every kind of a hangover possible——"

She lay with her head on Viv's shoulder, crying wearily. "I was so damn drunk. If I hadn't been I couldn't have——ever——"

"I know, babe, I know."

"I did it *because* I loved him. No matter how drunk I was I never would have if I hadn't thought about it before and thought it would keep me from going back."

"I know—I know, babe. Gee, I couldn't help knowing from the way you talked when you were sick that you loved him to beat hell."

"I wanted to stay away and give him a chance still to find some other girl that would make him happy—somebody not so selfish as me."

"Oh, babe——"

"But it didn't work that way. Oh, gosh, I want him so damn much now I want to die!"

"Then you'll go back, babe darlin'!"

"Oh, no—no, no, no, no, no!"

"Yes, babe, sure. There's no harm done. Unless——"

"Oh, not what you're thinking of—there's no danger of that, I'm positive!"

"Well, then, if you're sure of that, why nothing's changed. It never happened, babe. Think of it like that. Think of it that way now, and then don't think of it at all. And just keep thinking that the one important thing in the world *did* happen—you've never stopped loving him."

"Oh, I know, but—no, no, no——"

"But, babe, the only thing that matters in the world is love—don't you know that? I mean love with the mind and all the part of us that's really us. Oh, gee, don't you see? What happens to just the body doesn't count, kiddo, when the mind goes on loving and being faithful."

"But he loved my body so!"

"I know—gee, I know, babe. But just the same he loved you more. And he'll never know."

"Oh, no, no, I never lied to him."

"But you won't lie, you just won't tell!"

"But I couldn't go back and live with him again and let him go on loving me the same as ever when I'd been untrue!"

"Oh, but, babe darlin', you haven't been untrue! Only with your body that just isn't important. Don't you see that that kind of unfaithfulness just doesn't matter when you've been so true with your mind and all of you that counts? Oh, my God, babe, he's so damn lucky to have you love him so much and be so faithful to him in the real way!"

She half sobbed into Viv's neck: "Oh, life's so damn rotten! I wish I could die. I wish I'd never been born. Or else never grown up. I wish I was seven years old again, when my Dad told me I was having the best time I'd ever have in my life!"

"You are just a kid still, babe. Just a kid going to school still and learning lessons. You'll know how to go on now. You'll have learned how to be happy."

She moaned, crying on Viv's arm: "Oh, Dickie—Dickie——"

Presently, in utter exhaustion, she slept with her head on Viv's breast.

She lay on Viv's couch in the main room, hands over her eyes, keeping out the light.

"Eat something, babe. You'll get a headache."

"I've got one."

"Well, eating will fix it, then. I'll fix you some eggs."

"I don't want anything. I'm not hungry."

"Just some milk? I'll go out and get some—I've got time."

"No, honest, I don't want anything. Later on I will."

"I'll bring you something you like on the way home, then."

Lingering, Viv said: "Babe——"

"What?"

"I've got to beat it now. Are you all right?"

"Sure."

"Well—will you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know—write."

Viv said then: "*Please*, babe. It's the only way, darlin'. It'll make everything all right. You've got to, babe! *Please!* Will you?"

"Turn out the light."

She lay listening to Viv's soft footfalls down the worn bare stairs. The street door, audible through a window, opened and shut. Viv's steps down the sidewalk grew silent.

She rolled on her face, clutching the couch cover, sobbing tearlessly. An hour went by, and she sat up, shivering in the sharp air coming over the sill.

She caught up her coat and a key and, hatless, went out to the street. She went under the El tracks and up Ninth Street. A man spoke in the shadows, and she hurried on, half blinded by flooding, uncontrollable tears.

At Fifth Avenue she turned north, under a canopied entrance-way, turning her disfigured face out to the street. Desperate then at the violence of her hysteria, she fled into the shadows of Tenth Street and once more across Sixth Avenue and down Greenwich to Christopher again and back to Gay, and up the old warped stairs, stumbling, clinging, and inside the apple-green door at the stairs' top fell down beside Viv's couch, convulsed in an agony of release and bitter despair.

She turned then, and lay with her back against the couch, face strained up, arms outflung, moaning: "Oh, Dickie, I do love you so. So damn much I've *got* to come back or else die. Oh, please, please, forgive me, and I'll do everything in my power to make you happy this time! Oh, please, please——"

She lay a while longer, murmuring, her tears spent. Then she got up and went down the little corridor to her own room and turned on the light and sat down at her drawing table and took paper and pen. She gave a racking sigh and then wrote frenziedly, pen scratching little flurries of ink across the scribbled page.

She wrote:

DEAR DICKIE:

You probably hate me by now or at least have found somebody else and don't love me any more or maybe even remember me at all. But, Dickie, I have to say this now and just wait for your answer. Dickie, I want to come home.

I know you've probably decided by now you don't want to see me any more ever, and if you have, then I'll just shut up and you'll never be bothered with me again, I promise. But if you *do* still care a little bit like you used to and would be willing to try again, then write right away, please, just as soon as you get this, and I'll take the first train for Redfern just as soon as I can get packed up.

I love you so, Dickie. I've never stopped loving you all these six months, no matter how hard I've tried to forget you and give you a chance to forget about me and find somebody else to make you happier. But if you have found somebody else, it's all right. I'll just hope and pray then that you'll be happy and never bother you again.

But if you haven't and you do still care a little something about me, then write right away, please, and say you will let me come back. Because I do love you so damn much.

JAN.

P. S. If you're afraid I haven't been true to you, I have.

She read it quickly through, slipped it into an envelope, addressed it, and clutching it against her coat ran down again into the street.

§ 4

Viv, helping her pack, made her think of Dickie himself that day so long before when he had watched her get ready to go to Jonathan Wayde.

"You won't be coming back for a trip any time soon—will you, babe?"

"When we get some money saved up I'll be coming in to shop. But that probably won't be for a long time yet."

"Gee, when will I get to see you again then?"

"Why, you'll come out to the post to visit us!"

"You wouldn't want me around out there," Viv said. "Not with your swell friends."

A little later Viv said: "The show's closing—did I tell you?"

"No! Oh, Viv—gosh!"

"Yeah, Saturday's the last night."

"Oh, gosh, I'm *sorry*! What'll you do?"

"Oh, something'll turn up."

Janet said: "You can take my check! I won't need it. I'll phone Greg to make it out to cash and send it to you instead of me."

"Gee, thanks, babe, but I won't have to do that."

"But you'll *need* it——"

"I'll have my own check——"

"But you may need more till you get another job!"

"Don't worry about me, kiddo," Viv said.

They ate across from each other at their card table for the last time.

"Gee, I'm glad you're going, babe."

"That isn't very flattering," she said gayly.

"You know what I mean."

At seven-thirty Viv left for the theater.

"I'll hurry home. What do you want from the delicatessen, babe?"

Turning happily back to her packing, Janet thought, pausing a moment to listen to Viv's quiet footfalls, of the queer sharp dearness of familiar simple sounds.

When Viv came in at twelve o'clock she was drunk, and there was a man with her: the man who had been with her the night in Harlem, who had quarreled and whined.

His bald head and fat ringed fingers brought back nauseous memories. Janet slipped back to her own room and lay in the dark, bewildered, waiting for him to go.

Viv's voice coming loudly down the little hallway kept babbling about two hundred and twenty-five dollars. She said once, laughing hoarsely: "I want to take a trip. That's what it costs."

From her couch Janet could see the bottle on the mantel and Viv and the man step up to it, pouring two tumblers half full.

The man put his arm around Viv's waist, his fat hand squeezing her breast; Janet turned her face to the wall.

Viv had stopped talking about the two hundred and twenty-five dollars. Their voices were lower now, murmuring at times, and sometimes they were silent. Once Viv said sharply: "No! Not here!"

Presently impatience seized Janet and she called: "Viv!"

Viv came along the corridor, bumping against the walls.

"What's the idea of bringing that fool here?"

"My business, babe," Viv answered in a soft voice.

"Well, get him out! I want to get to bed!"

"Okay. He's going pretty soon."

Viv went back, bumping against the walls again. The two emptied the bottle at the mantel.

Viv murmured: "Is it a bargain, then?" and the man said: "Sold."

Viv came back down the hallway, reeling. "Going now, babe."

"Who?"

"Him. Me. Both of us."

"Where are *you* going?" she cried.

"With him."

Viv's drunken face was a white blot. She stood in the doorway, holding to its sides.

Janet sat up, her eyes wide and bright and despising in the dark. "*You—damn—whore!*"

Viv made a faint sound and put her hand up, staggering as she turned. She went reeling back to the lighted room. In a little while a door closed, leaving stillness for a moment. Then loud scuffling footsteps went down the outside stairs.

She lay unmoving in the dark, all the happiness of an hour before struck out of her heart.

After a long while she got up and, moving in a daze as though she had been drinking herself, put the last odds and ends into her suitcase and got into her pajamas, sitting on her couch another hour in the dark before going to bed.

Crawling under the covers finally, she fell into the drugged imperfect sleep of nervous exhaustion. She dreamed of foot-

steps on stairs, going down, softly, and once she heard them come up, slowly, laboring, as though in a crucifixion of weariness.

Disturbed by the sounds in her dreams she kept rousing heavily, awakened fully at last by her hand striking the wall. The clock on the sill showed that daybreak was near.

She thought she heard someone groaning and supposed Viv had come home sick.

She tried to go back to sleep, but the groaning sound came again, and she sat up, feeling chill. She got out of bed and groped along the little corridor to the main room.

She went to Viv's couch and felt along its length, but no one was there. Straightening, she patted the wall for the light button, but it eluded her fingers. She fumbled to the mantel and struck a match, starting to turn back to find the switch, but a piece of pad paper pinned above the hearth sprang into the glow of the match's flame. She held the match close to it and saw that there were scrawled words on it. She read:

Babe darling forgive me but I'm just too tired to face going on alone. I love you and hope you'll be happy now always. Please mail my letter and take the \$225 in my pocket-book and send me home.

Viv.

The stamped letter lying on the mantel beside the match-box was addressed to Mrs. Olga Svennsen, Falls Bend, Wisconsin.

She stood shivering until the match burned down to her insensate fingers and went out. With a little terrified cry, she seized the box and lit another.

Springing into the room then toward the wall switch, she heard water running and saw for the first time that there was a light in the bathroom, and staring through the kitchen she saw beneath the partly raised bathroom window with its shade pulled down to its own base, Viv's fair head resting on her arms on the bowl.

She stood staring and trembling, and the match went out again, and she clutched for the switch with both hands, filling the room with light at last.

She called in a strangled voice: "Viv! Viv!"

The fair hair stirred in the morning breeze coming into the main bathroom window from the air chute.

She ran then, babbling, along the hallway and tore at the bathroom door. It was locked. She ran back and into the kitchen and flung up the little window, falling through onto the warped board bathroom floor.

Viv was sitting on the lidded toilet, leaning forward on the washstand. Both faucets were open, and their flow going down the drain was bright red.

Janet screamed, "*Viv!*" and shook the drooped shoulders. Viv's head rolled back, turning her white contorted face up to the light. There were brown stains around her open lips, running down on her cheeks. The stream in the basin was from her wrists, which were gaping mouths, vomiting blood.

Janet cried, babbling: "Viv! Viv! Oh, what have you *done*——"

She put her shaking hands on Viv's face, lifting the eyelids. She set her ear to Viv's breast, and there was no answering stir.

Daylight was coming down the air chute.

She held Viv's stained twisted face against her, crying up at the ceiling.

She wavered and slipped to the edge of the tub, burying her face in the warm dead flesh of Viv's neck.

DICKIE met her at the Redfern station. She went into his arms in the rain praying *God, God, forgive me!* and he hid his face in the wet worn fur collar of the coat he had gone cold himself to buy for her and whispered: "Darlin'! You did come home!"

They swung out to the taxis across the puddled platform, arm in arm, fingers locked tightly, and Dickie said: "It isn't a dream this time, is it, kid? It's honest to God *you?*"

The taxi rolled away into the driving torrents, and she lay against him, clutching him fiercely, sobbing, her face hidden against the cold metal of his collar ornaments.

"What's the matter, kid?"—swift fear leaping. "Aren't you glad to be back?"

"Oh, Dickie, I love you!" she moaned.

His face was pressed against her blowing hair, freed of its drenched hat. "Darlin'! My darlin'. Nobody else's. Gosh, I'm happy!"

The rain beat on the cab windows, enraged, menacing. Locked in a mute crushing embrace they sped along the deserted twisting road to the post.

The rain and the wind kept on outside, and the big half-empty house was chill, but the bedroom was warm from the driftwood on the hearth.

The great chair by the fire held them both. All the tears of the past days had made her weak, and she cried again wearily against his breast.

"Kid, for God's sake. What is it, huh? Are you sorry you came back? Do you want to go away again?"

"Oh, no, no, no—I love you, Dickie. But I'm just—all shot."

"What makes you so shot?"

"Oh, just tired—so tired I'm a little crazy!"

"Gosh, kid, if I thought you were sorry you came back the whole damn world would go smash."

"Oh, don't worry—it isn't that. I couldn't live if I lost you now. But it just doesn't seem true I'm back and it's really you!"

"That's the way I feel too. I've dreamed so damn much, and woke up and found it wasn't true. At first I couldn't believe you wouldn't be back, but when I didn't hear from you month after month it finally hit me you honest to God must be gone for good. Your Dad wrote and said you were all right, and that was all I had——"

"Oh, don't think about it any more!"

"The fellows kept coming over to get me to go out and get tight. They didn't know what it was all about, but they knew something was damn wrong."

"Did you go?"—so fearfully.

"I—I couldn't, kid. I'd have done it once. But I've been getting older lately, I guess."

She cried so violently against his cheek that he said: "What's the matter, kid? Aren't you glad? Would you have wanted me to go?"

"Oh, no, no—yes—thanks——"

She told him then: "But if you ever want—to go get tight—without me—or want anybody besides me—why, you go on—I won't mind—I'll try not to care——"

"For God's sake, darlin'!"

"Oh, I've been so rotten to you!"

"It was my fault, kid, mostly. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. It wasn't you."

"Yes, it was, but I'm going to make it all up to you now. Oh, I'll never do anything to hurt you again! I just want to please you—I want to do everything in my power to make up for everything and make you always be glad I did come back!"

"Darlin'—darlin'!"

"We *can* start all over again, can't we—pretend nothing ever happened?"

"You're damn right, ol'-timer—a brand-new start! None of the old mistakes, by God!"

"Pretend now's the start and nothing ever happened up till now?"

"Yep, and this time it'll be different, kid. No more debts. Sitting on the world, by gosh—at last! We'll have decent clothes

and get out among people—no more sticking home by ourselves and never having a good time. You watch, darlin'—we'll make a go of it this time—you'll see!"

"We've got to. Oh, don't ever send me away again!"

"Me send you away?"

"Yes, for any reason—no matter what—I mean, just don't let me go——"

"Oh, darlin'—for God's sake."

"But things could happen—things you—things we don't know anything about."

"No, sir, nothing'll happen any more. We're older now, and a hell of a lot wiser. By gosh, kid, I'm glad you went. It had to be, I guess, just like it was. Yep, everything had to work out just the way it has."

She was very still; then she put her hand to his face. "Dickie, some time I want to tell you—all about New York—everything that happened——"

"Sure, kid, I want to hear."

"—but not to-night—I'm so tired still I just don't want to think about anything but just that I'm—home again—and got you."

"Sure, kid. That's all I want you to do. I want to hear all about your adventures, but I know you had a hell of a time, working so darn hard and being all alone and everything, and don't feel like going over it all now. So just go ahead and forget everything and get rested up. Later on I'll get a kick out of listening about everything."

Her slow tears drenched his pajama shirt, making a cold spot against his flesh.

"Rest, kid. Don't. Just rest, darlin'."

"Oh, too tired for rest. So tired I see things."

"Damn it, you did work too hard. I'm proud as hell, no kiddin', of your success, Jan. But you hadn't ought to have worked so you got yourself all worn out. You're thin, kid—you look older. You don't look like yourself. And gosh, you sure have got your nerves all knocked to hell."

"I know—but I'll be all right in a little while again."

"Sure you will, because you're going to take it easy now. No

more housework—no more floor-scrubbing. We're going to get a girl, that's what we're going to do!"

"Oh, but can we?"

"Sure we can. Why not, huh? What have we got to spend all our money for now? Out of debt, ol'-timer! Sitting on the world!"

A bugle cleared its throat and sent a call out across the night. They kept very still until its last tremolo rode away on the wind.

His breast was wet again under her face.

"Kid—don't. *What's* the matter, huh?"

"Oh, Call to Quarters—I've always loved it so—ever since I was a little kid. And I haven't heard it for so long."

"You'll hear it all the rest of your life now. You'll never go away from it again. Will you, darlin'?"

"Oh, no, no, no—never. . . ."

The rain and the wind beat on against the panes. The embers of the driftwood were dying, their death leaving the room dark and chill.

§ 2

THE launches and yachts of the summer were gone, and the beach was a cold white dead thing. Staring out to sea, the bleak old houses, battered further by the winter, were shabbier than ever, the faded gray of their porches peeling off now like the workings of some dire disease. They seemed squat, after the towers of the city, as though crouching in shame of their affliction, or sagging, spent, at the incredible near surcease of another cruel season.

"Well, I'm glad you're back, young 'un," Myra Chase said. "Bob and I'd begun to suspect you'd deserted us for good. Everyone had, in fact. You've been quite a favorite bridge-club topic, my dear. You've alleviated an otherwise tedious and monotonous winter."

"Oh, I suppose I have."

They walked, arms linked, along the sidewalk curving with the quarters.

"I'm glad you're going to go out now," Myra said. "People

are so catty. I suppose you knew that your avoiding things before gave 'em lots to chat about too."

"But we were so broke! Everybody knew that!"

"Of course, but you should know that wouldn't stop their chatting. You should have kept up and gone broker, to be sure."

The two front rooms of the set where they rang the bell were full of ladies clustered in little groups, prattling and laughing gayly. Heads turned toward the hall.

"Why, it's little Mrs. Blythe!"

"Hello there, Mrs. Blythe! So glad you're back!"

They grouped around her, asking questions, holding her hands.

"So nice to see you again, dear!"

"Weren't you mad about New York?"

"I'll bet she had a marvelous time!"

"I'll bet all that work was just a big bluff!"

"Tell us about your adventures in the great big wicked city!"

She sat in a corner of a davenport with Myra. The ladies, chatting in little groups, said:

"My dear, I'm telling you she hasn't the vaguest notion in the world about economy! The idea of buying a vacuum cleaner, pinched as they are!"

"He did it, my dear—to make the work lighter for his little tootsie-wootsie!"

"Oh, I don't doubt it. He's even dumber than she is."

"Impossible!"

And:

"Doesn't she look awful to-day? I never saw her look worse, and that's going some!"

"Anyone would look a fright in that hat."

"Where do you suppose she dug it up? It looks like the vintage of nineteen-five."

"Isn't it queer that she seems to take no interest whatsoever in her personal appearance? You'd think a commanding officer's wife . . ."

The ladies took their seats at the small tables.

"So sorry you don't play, Mrs. Blythe!"

"I'm going to learn," she said.

"Are you really?"

"Oh, that's splendid. We'll see more of you than we did last year, then, won't we?"

"I'm glad you've decided to take it up," Myra murmured. "It's really loads of fun when you pick your own party, and we'll have fun, just the four of us, you and Dickie and Bob and me."

"Oh, it never was the game I objected to, you know."

"I know."

"Aren't you going to play to-day?"

"Not to-day. It makes me nervous these days to play with this gang of cut-throats."

The ladies at the near table said:

"Oh, yes, my dear, she did indeed pursue him! I know, because we went out on the same transport with them——"

"But what I'm saying is that they *had* known each other before in Panama, and the affair had already started then. Why, we used to see them all the time parked off in a corner of the Army and Navy Club porch, and *everybody* was criticizing——"

"Well, at any rate she *did* carry on outrageously on the transport, because the whole *ship* was talking——"

"Pardon me, Julia—we had simple honors, didn't we?"

"Why, no, I had the king and Mrs. Warrington had the jack, ten."

"Oh, no, we must have had the king, because I'm sure I wouldn't have bid on the ace, queen!"

"But you did, my dear! Because I remember wondering at the time, because I had so many hearts myself, and thinking you *must* have the ace, king, queen, and I was so surprised when Mrs. Grove had it——"

"But I'm positive——"

"Oh, but I remember very well . . ."

Myra had sewing on her lap.

Janet said: "Why, what are you making?"

"Little things."

"For whom?"

"A relative of mine."

"Oh. Your sister?"

"No. My son—I hope."

"Myra! You're not——"

"Oh, yes, I am," Myra smiled.

The ladies at the near table were beaming.

"It's just grand, Mrs. Chase!"

"I'm so glad for you, Myra dear."

"She'll be such a sweet little mother. Won't she?"

"Darling."

"Two hearts."

"Two spades."

"Gosh, Myra," Janet said.

"I'm tickled silly," Myra murmured. "At first I was mad as hops, but after you start you get to wanting it. That's just a smart trick of Nature's."

The ladies at the table said to each other:

"You knew, of course, that the Bradburys are expecting."

"Heavens, no!"

"Why, I thought they were separating."

"They were, and then she found she was that way. Personally I think she did it deliberately to hold him."

"What a pity. She's such a common thing."

"Absolutely not his type in the least. What on earth do you suppose he ever saw in her?"

"You know what was said around Adams Barracks, don't you?"

"No."

"What?"

"Why, you know her people simply rushed the wedding——"

"But the child isn't *due* until August——"

"Well, my dear, something could have happened before, you know."

"Well, it'll be a blessing if something happens this time."

"Your bid, Louise."

§ 3

SHE heard the little chimes clock on the mantelpiece strike three and turned gently so as not to rouse him, but he awoke and drew her head onto his breast.

"What's the matter, kid—can't you sleep?"

"No, but I'm sorry I woke you up."

"That's all right." He was half asleep still. "Like to wake up and find you here—used to wake up—and you wouldn't be . . ."

He slept and woke again.

"Kid—are you crying?"

"No, no."

"What's the matter? Are you so damn nervous still?"

"Oh—my mind won't rest."

"Why not?"

"It just—keeps thinking so."

"What about?"

"Oh—everything."

"Did you have such a hell of a time, no kiddin'?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you go ahead and talk about it and get it off your chest? Go on, tell me all about it, darlin'."

"Oh, that's what I want to do!"

"Go ahead, then, right now. I'll stay awake. I'm interested to hear all about your struggles, kid, but I didn't want to ask about 'em any more because you said you wanted to forget——"

"I did—I do—I wish I could, but I can't! I mean I didn't want to forget for good, because I always did mean to tell you sometime, but it was just all so close still, and I couldn't stand talking about it all so soon—but maybe if I do now no matter how I feel, it'll let me alone."

She held him very tightly and went on:

"Oh, if you knew how damn miserable I was right from the start. When I left here I just didn't quite know what it was all about, and I'd drilled myself to keep feeling numb like I was when I got here, and so I could still go, like I'd made up my mind to, without it hurting very much—then. But just as soon as I got away I woke up, and when I got to New York, Dickie, I was thinking over and over, 'Oh, I didn't want this—I didn't want this!' and I knew that the one thing I *did* want in all the world was to turn around and go running straight back to you. But I didn't, because I'd sworn I was going to give you a chance to get to be happy without me, because I thought I could never

make you happy like you deserved, so I just worked hard so as not to think about you, and took long walks to get myself so tired I'd go right to sleep and not stay awake and cry for you. Then I thought sure when I got my job *it* 'd make me forget, since it was the thing I'd prayed for for years—but it didn't, it just didn't seem to mean anything at all, so I—I started going out to parties then and drinking a little and—and trying to get interested in other men, and I—I petted a few, Dickie, because I'd sworn I mustn't go back to you any more anyway, and I was just so damn crazy, wanting you so bad, that I *had* to do something to try to take my mind off so I could stay away and give you a chance to find somebody else, Dickie—and then—Dickie——”

She saw then that he was asleep. She stayed a moment looking at him; then turned away from him very gently and lay sobbing quietly into the pillow until daylight began coming in around the edges of the drawn shades.

He woke her in the morning kissing her, and she drew away.

“What's the matter, kid? It's late—wake up.”

“I don't want to wake up.”

“It's ten o'clock!”

“Why didn't you go to the company?”

“It's Sunday, kid! A swell day!”

He asked then: “What's the matter, huh? Did you wake up on the wrong side of bed?”

“Oh, I didn't sleep hardly at all last night.”

“Gosh, that's too bad. Did I keep you awake?”

“No.”

“You had another of your blue spells, I bet. Damn it, kid, why don't you get off all this stuff you've got on your mind and quit thinking about it, huh?”

“I was telling you last night, and you went to sleep!”

“*Did* I? You *were*? Hell, I remember now—sure you were! I'll be damned! Gosh, darlin', I'm sorry—honest to God I was tired as hell—I'd had a hell of a hard day!”

He said then, kissing her: “I'm sorry, darlin'—I don't blame you for being sore. Gosh, what a trick to play on you. Go on,

won't you? Tell me now. I do want to hear—no kiddin', I'm interested as hell. I wanted to hear all along, but you didn't want to talk about it before, and you just happened to pick a time when I was too dead to the world to listen. Go ahead, darlin'—go on and tell me now."

She came back to him, sighing against his breast.

"Oh, I do love you so—I don't mind how you do——"

"Gosh, I love you, kid——"

"As much as I do you?"

"More!"

"And *will* you understand?"

"Why, sure. What makes you think I won't?"

"Oh, I don't know—New York's so different—everybody thinks different from here—from the army at all. I know you've never known anything like there—I almost couldn't expect you to understand—you're so different from—from Viv—she understood everything——"

"From who?"

"My roommate. The girl I lived with."

"I didn't know you lived with anybody, kid. What kind of a girl was she?"

She told him in a strained voice: "She was the most wonderful girl I ever knew. She was a show girl."

"A what? A *chorus* girl?"

"Yes."

"For God's sake, Jan," he said. "Where'd you pick her up?"

She laughed a little, brokenly.

"That's just exactly what I did do—or rather, she did me. We just found each other."

He said again: "For God's sake, Jan." Then: "You hadn't ought to do things like that. You don't know anything about people you pick up that way. You'd ought to have been more careful the kind of people you ran around with. A girl like that's apt to get you into bad company or something."

She lay still, hardly breathing.

"Specially in a big place like New York. You've got to be *damn* careful what kind of people you get in with. It's not like the army, where you know everybody's the right kind. She didn't get you in with bad company, did she, kid?"

She said, "No," letting out her breath, and lay quiet, her hands fallen across her body.

"Well, go ahead."

"What?"

"Go ahead and tell me what you were going to tell me about."

"Oh—I'm sleepy again now."

"What's the matter—huh, kid?"

"I'm just sleepy. Just all at once. You go on and get up."

She turned away, burrowing into her arms on the pillow. He lay quiet beside her.

She lay without moving or breathing for a moment; then all of a sudden flung back against him, kissing him with heart-breaking young desperation, her mouth sobbing against his.

THE beach on the bay side of the spit was narrow and pebbly, and she walked for a mile and half, wading in the edge of the warming water, passing only a lone clam fisherman and a trio of officers' children in a home-made sailboat cruising the shore.

The first of the summer yachts and launches had returned, at anchor in the Redfern Cove, their white hulls reflecting the sunset.

Nearing the post again, she heard the Retreat gun's muffled boom, and stopped, standing straight and still in the tide lapping around her bare legs. The flagpole was hidden behind the trees, and the quarters and the bugle far away, but the familiar air rang in her heart, and at its last imagined note she trudged on through the weedy water, grown cold with the descent of the sun.

She washed the sand off her legs with the hose in the yard and went upstairs.

"Hello!"

She answered, "Hello," and he came out of the bathroom and wiped the lather from his mouth, and they kissed, carefully.

"Where you been?"

"Where does it look like?"

"Well, don't go snapping my head off. I meant which beach."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I went up the bay side."

"Who went along?"

"Nobody."

"Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I wanted to go out when I did. I left about three."

She went to get out of her bathing suit.

"Well, I wish you would wait for me once in a while, can't you, kid? I don't like coming in and finding you not home when I've been looking forward to seeing you. And besides, I'd like to get out on the beach again this year."

"Well, if I wait till you get home it's gotten cold by then. I like to go early while the sun's still high."

"What do you stay out so late for, then, if it gets cold? You've been out an hour and a half now since I got back!"

"Oh, I didn't realize I was walking so far. I just kept going and going and didn't know the time till I heard the gun, and then I was almost back!"

"Well, for God's sake, don't bite me. It seems like every time you do go out alone you come back in a bad humor!"

"I'm not in a bad humor."

"The hell you're not. Well—moody or something, then. You get morbid when you're alone—yes, you do too!"

"Oh, I don't! And, anyway, another reason I'd rather go alone is because I like to walk along the beach, and you always want to just swim."

"What the hell's the sense of wearing a bathing suit if you're not going to use it—huh?"

"Oh, just to feel—free. And I do swim sometimes, but I like to walk too. You always want to just stay in one place close to the post and swim the whole time."

He went on shaving, grimacing into the mirror. "What's the matter with you and Myra? Why don't you take her out with you this year? You and she used to have a swell time going out on the beach last summer."

"You know Myra doesn't feel like going out any more."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Don't you *know*?"

"No. I didn't know she was sick. She looked all right the last time they were over to play bridge."

"Why, she's going to have a baby!"

He stared. "She *is*?"

"I thought of course you knew."

"Hell, no!"

"Well, you must be pretty dumb, then."

"For God's sake," he said. "So that's why Bob's been acting so damn goofy and happy lately."

The razor moved slowly across his cheek. "Is she glad too?"

"Yes, she is now. She didn't want it at first."

"God damn," he said then in queer tone. "It'll be funny to think of old Bob and Myra with a kid."

§ 2

SHE said bewilderedly, staring at him across the desk in the small downstairs den: "But I just don't see—how it happened. So soon——"

"Well, hell, kid, don't worry about it. I guess we'd ought to have kept track better, maybe, but we'll just borrow a hundred from the bank and pay it back quick and be careful after this."

"It was my fault—but I thought I was sure we were all right still. I must have added wrong some place."

"Well, don't worry—it isn't as bad as it might be. Damn it, anyhow, we had to have that dinner, whether we were broke or not—even if we'd figured right. It was the only way to finish up everybody on the post. We'd owed some of 'em for over two months—ever since you got back—and they were probably already passing it around that we didn't know what we'd ought to do. So don't worry any more, ol'-timer—it had to be done."

She sat staring into the empty fireplace.

"Aw, kid, don't look like that. Don't take it that way—a hundred bucks——"

She said, pushing back her hair: "That's almost a whole month's pay—and it just seems so symbolic. It makes it seem just like—*before*."

He came and sat on the arm of her chair, laughing at her.

"It won't be like before, kid. Get that out of your head. Hell, we'll go a little easy here and there and have it off again in a couple of months or so. Say, maybe we could get along with fifty."

She shook her head.

"It'd be just the same. We'd have to make the Redfern people wait for the dishes and linen money. And we can't make the Commissary and the P-Ex. We'd owe it anyway, one way or another."

He said in a suddenly different voice: "God, kid—damn if I do see where it's all gone to!"

"Oh, Dickie, you can't entertain like we've been, and save."

"Maybe not, but by gosh, we hadn't ought to get behind again! Damn it, it's Elouisa—she's robbing us! She hadn't ought to get so much!"

"Oh, but Dickie, she's worth it, if we're *going* to entertain. How do you suppose I'd ever have got along with an untrained girl, not knowing any more than I do? Why, she's done everything! If we could quit having things we could let her go. I wouldn't mind doing the work again. I'd almost rather instead of feeling so idle and worthless not doing anything, after working so hard in New York."

"Well," he said, "we can't quit having things—we're in the swim now, and we've got to keep up. But anyhow we're squared up for a while. We're set for the summer, kid—except the bridge clubs and beach parties. Gosh, if we'd only known about where we stood before we joined the evening club——"

"If we could only take a vacation from things for six months and get something ahead——"

"Nobody'd know what to make of that."

"But, gosh, they ought to understand—they were lieutenants themselves once!"

"Sure—nobody's rich now, so far as that goes. But you're supposed to manage your share somehow, no matter what your rank."

They sat together, hands grasped tightly.

"Well, don't worry, kid. There won't be any more. Just this hundred. And you watch—we'll have it off in no time."

They kissed with a sort of stricken tenderness; trying to hide from each other the inquietude in their eyes.

§ 3

MESS call for lunch was blowing as she flung up the back windows to let the faint breeze through the stifling house, and she saw him walking with Bob across the parade ground.

The heat and her depression made her feel feverish. She went into the bathroom and threw cold water in her face, drying it away hurriedly.

Oh, God, she thought, snap me out of this before he gets here!

He came up the back stairs calling "hello." She went to meet him, and he put his arms around her and kissed her lips and her hot cheeks.

"Know what to-day is—huh?"

"No—oh, the twenty-second?"

"Nothin' else but. Two years, ol'-timer!"

She hung against him, weakened by the heat, and he said: "Hadn't we ought to celebrate, huh? Have a little party with a few drinks, maybe, for old times' sake?"

"You know we can't afford it."

"But just a little one—just Bob and Myra. I already told Bob to plan on it—I thought you'd like to have 'em in."

She went into the bedroom and lay down on one of the bunks.

"Huh, kid? How about it?"

"Oh, all right. But I don't feel very sociable—it's so hot."

He sat down beside her. "Not even with me, do you, kid? What's the matter? A lot of times lately you haven't seemed to feel very sociable with me, and it hasn't been the heat. What's the matter, huh?"

"Oh, I feel rotten to-day, Dickie. Please let me alone."

He saw her slow tears drip into the pillow. "Damn it, you've got another of your spells. What's the matter? Kid—are you so damn unhappy?"

"Oh, I don't feel like talking now, Dickie."

"Is it the hundred bucks? Is that worrying you still?"

"Oh—I do think about that too."

"And what else?"

"Oh, *nothing*. Yes, it is that—that is it."

"But kid, we're set now. We aren't going to need any more. We'll have it off by September, easy."

He leaned across her, trying to see her eyes. "Damn it, you're by yourself too much. You've got a moody disposition, and it doesn't do you any good to be alone. You don't have enough to do, that's the trouble. Why don't you help Myra sew or something?"

"You know I hate sewing."

"Well, you like to design dresses—I should think you'd like to make 'em too."

"Baby dresses?"

He was silent, a queer severe look on his face. Then he said: "Why don't you get something to do out in Redfern? Couldn't you find some kind of a job out there to keep you busy?"

"Sell hats?"

"Oh, for God's sake, kid. I mean some kind of a designing job."

"You can't get anything like that here. They buy all their stuff ready-made from New York."

"Well, it seems a damn shame to spend all your money learning how to do something you like to do and then not be able to go on getting a kick out of it."

She said sharply: "If I got a job now it wouldn't be to get a kick out of it—it'd be to help *us* out, like we planned in the first place. I have been thinking about it. I think maybe if I wrote to Gregory he'd let me try free-lancing—sending stuff in."

"Who's he?"

"My old boss."

"Oh. How come you call him by his first name?"

"Because we were friends! He's young—why shouldn't I?"

"You never said anything about him before."

"I haven't said much about anything yet, have I?" she asked in a weary voice.

"When are you going to?"

"Oh, Dickie—" she hid her face in the pillow—"please—not now—I'm so hot and tired."

He said, sitting beside her, looking at her with his face set queerly again: "You know, kid, you act so funny sometimes. Sometimes I damn near get to thinking you're hiding something from me. Are you, Jan? Are you?"

She caught her breath. "Oh, please, Dickie—please—no, no! I'll tell you everything there is to tell, I swear—please just go away now and let me alone."

After a moment he went quietly away. At the door he said in a strained voice: "Aren't you going to eat?"

"No—I'm not hungry."

The faucet in the bathroom sprayed viciously. Then she

heard him go downstairs and heard the sounds of his knife and fork and the pantry door squeaking and Elouisa's low throaty singing coming from the kitchen.

Bob Chase was so gay he wouldn't bid sensibly. During his fourth drink he kept saying: "I'm about to become a father," after each hand was bid and played.

"You didn't know, did you?" Myra said. "He was about to become a father, and I married him to make an honest man of him. What would people say if they knew?"

Bob kept being afraid Myra was going to get tired, playing so long. He was afraid it would hurt her to drink, and worried about her smoking too much.

Myra grew serious with her second drink. "It's funny how you get after you really have one started. We thought we didn't want any kids at all, and we were both so mad after we knew that we wouldn't speak to each other for a week. Then all of a sudden I started wanting it, and Bob caught the spirit from me. And we've been happier ever since than any time the whole five years we've been married. I don't think you really know what marriage is till you get like this."

"I'm afraid I'm not very maternal," Janet said.

"You think you aren't. That's just the point—wait till you start having one, and you'll be so crazy for it you can hardly wait."

There was a new light in Myra's eyes and a new gentleness in Bob's big plain face when he looked at her.

Dickie's face when he had sat down had looked set and lined, and he had been so quiet that Bob and Myra had teased him. The lines were softening now, and he kept gazing from Bob to Myra and from Myra to Bob so intently that every little while someone had to call his attention back to the game.

Bob said: "You're looking pale to-night, Jan."

"The heat got me to-day."

"Are you nervous?" Myra wanted to know. "Your hand's trembling holding your cards."

"Oh, I guess it's the liquor," she said. "It does that to me sometimes."

At twelve the Chases went home.

They turned back from the front hall together, and Janet went into the living room again.

He said: "Aren't you coming to bed yet?"

"Yes, I'm just going to straighten up the room for Elouisa and put the dishes in the sink."

He asked, lingering: "Can I help?"

"Oh, no—you go on up."

He trudged off up the stairs, and she stood still beside the card table, looking at her shaking hands.

She carried the dishes to the pantry and went out on the back porch to shake the tablecloth over the rail. The sentry came up the back road, and she leaned in the shadows watching him pass with his resigned patient tread.

She thought: Oh, God, God—please—please——

She went back in the house and folded up the card table and took it to the hall closet and set the chairs in their places away from the middle of the room.

In the doorway leading to the hall she clung a moment to the curtains; then she went to the stairs and up them, climbing as though very weary, one hand held over her heart.

He was sitting on the far bunk, arms on his knees, his blouse off, hung over a chair, and his puttees propped together at the foot of the bed. He looked up as she came across the hall, and the utter love in his face made her stop in the doorway, sobbing suddenly inside.

He got up and held out his arms. "Darlin'."

She went forward, hesitantly, praying again: Oh, please, God—oh, please, God——

He held her tightly, and neither of them spoke.

He said then, huskily: "Forgive me, kid?"

"Forgive *you*—for what?"

"For this afternoon. Gosh, darlin', I didn't mean what I said. I never distrusted you—you've always played so damn straight about everything you've done."

She fought the panic of childhood, clinging to him with a fierce desperation as though it were the last time she might ever have him in her arms.

The panic passed, and she felt faint and ill and sagged against him, her head drooping down on his breast.

"Jan! What's the matter? Are you sick, kid?"

"Sit down," she whispered, and he carried her to the big chair by the empty grate.

She put her head down over its arm, and the faintness went away, leaving only an utter desolate weariness. Her head fell back against his breast.

"What's the matter, darlin'? Did you drink too much—huh?"

"Oh, Dickie," she said, "you can send me away if you want to, but I've got to tell you. I can't have us start another year like this. But if you don't want me any more I'll go away again just as soon as I can get packed."

She shut her eyes, not to see his white face. She said, expressionlessly: "I wasn't true to you in New York."

She felt his muscles go lax and still, as though all the life had gone out of them.

"Oh, God," he said, taking his arm out from under her and drawing away from her, leaning into his hands on the far arm of the chair.

She lay across the other chair arm, face in her hands too, whimpering.

He said: "Then you lied in your letter, cold-bloodedly. You said you had been true."

"In spirit," she whispered.

"In spirit!"

He got up, letting her roughly from his lap into the chair alone. He went to the door, then stopped abruptly and turned back and dropped to the edge of one of the bunks, his head in his hands.

"Was it that—Gregory?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried. "We were just good friends! We respected each other!"

"What did he respect you for?"

She crouched in the chair, crying at last the flowing tears of heart-break.

"How many fellows did you neck?"

"Oh—why, I don't know—I don't remember that."

He put his face in the pillow and was still, his feet on the floor, arms around his head.

"All the time you were away," he said in a voice so muffled

she could hardly understand, "I never looked at another girl. And you've probably necked half the populace of New York!"

She lifted her head and looked at him, confusion stopping her tears. "Oh—necking—that's such a little thing."

"A little thing!" he said with a sort of bitter laughing sob. "Yes—just a little thing!"

She stared at him, a chill catching at her heart.

"How would *you* feel," he asked her, "if you'd come home clean—without necking anybody—and I told you I'd necked every girl that came along?"

Her chilled lips moved without making a sound. At last: "I—I don't know," she whispered.

"Oh, God Almighty," he groaned into the pillow, "I wish you'd never told me! I was happy—why the hell didn't you let me stay?"

She lay curled in the chair's seat, shivering knees drawn under her chin. She lay very still, staring with wide dry eyes into the empty grate.

EVENING mess call was coming over the parade ground as they came up the peeling steps together.

"Well, that was luck."

"Yes."

"I had a hunch we wouldn't find many of 'em in—it's such a swell day everybody was pretty sure to be out swimming."

"We've got that off our minds now."

"Yep, thank God. I'd been having nightmares about it for a couple of months—those dinner calls. We're lucky getting the new people off too."

"I'm so tired of calling," she said.

"Well, hell, we're all cleaned up now."

"I mean calling in general—the idea of it. It's so dumb. Everybody'll be just as glad as we are that they were out."

"Sure, but they'd talk about you if you didn't pay back what you owe."

In the house she sighed: "I'm getting so tired of people."

She took off her calling dress and put on a smock brought from New York. He stood loosening his Sam Browne, frowning into the fireplace.

"I'm getting kind of fed up on 'em myself lately. Damn it, I don't know—it's kind of seemed like lately—as if they're catching on to—to this and that about us."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Why, that we're having our troubles—that things aren't altogether roses with us."

She took her drawing board out of the closet, settling by a window to sketch against her knees.

"I'm glad you've got some work to do now," he said. "Maybe you'll stay in a better humor."

"I'm glad I've got some way of helping us make a little more money," she told him tartly. "Even if it won't be much, doing it this way—not having a regular job—it'll help, though."

He said: "How about putting off getting started on that a few minutes, Jan? I kind of wanted to talk a while. Huh?"

"You know I have to get these designs off by to-morrow."

"Well, can you draw and listen too?"

"Sure."

He stood watching her sketch; then lay down on one of the bunks, arms under his head. The sound of her pencil and the ticking of the mantel clock were the only noises in the room.

He said finally, looking up at the ceiling still: "How do you think we're getting along?"

Her pencil fell across her sketch, digging a black line. "Oh, if you want me to go away——"

"Oh, damn it, Jan," he said, "I don't. I've thought about it and thought maybe you'd ought to go, but I—I know I couldn't get on without you. I'm unhappy having you like this, but I'd be unhappier still not having you at all. I know that's how it'd be. I'm trying my damndest to quit thinking the things I do and seeing the things I do, even when I shut my eyes on 'em—God, I wish I'd done something to you so you'd know what the hell it is to feel like this!"

"I do know," she said, choking, realizing for the first time: If he'd so much as kissed any other girl—just once—I'd want to kill her!

"I do love you so," she told him, forcing the words through her tightening, aching throat, "no matter what's happened—no matter what you think of me. And it ought to make you feel better—to know I'm suffering too—that I want to *die* when you touch me nowadays, and it isn't—the way you used to——"

He lay still, his arms over his eyes.

"We had so much this time," she said, "and we've lost it. I thought we were already losing it—when I tried to tell you—when I did tell you, I mean—I thought I was saving us then. Oh, I wish I'd never said anything—it was better the other way, with just me suffering—instead of you too."

He said: "I almost wish we'd never gotten to love each other. If we'd just stayed the swell friends we were when we got married—not giving a damn what each other did——"

"I don't think any people in the world are happy who love each other!"

"Bob and Myra are."

She fell to sketching again, absently, in the failing light.

"Jan," he said, "I'm trying my God-damnedest to forget, and it's up to you to help me. That's the only way we can go on living together and ever be happy again."

"I know—but all I can do is keep on trying to make you believe how much I love you and always did, even then."

"No, it isn't," he said. "You can do something else. Would you do something I asked you to do, Jan, if I promised it would make me feel different, if it was the best chance I had to forget?"

"Oh, *yes*—haven't I told you from the start I wanted to do anything in my power?"

"Even if it meant giving up a hell of a lot—going through a lot?"

She looked up at him then, her pencil suddenly still, and whispered: "What?"

"Have a baby for us."

She felt violently chill, as though a freezing wind had come blowing in the open window out of the July afternoon.

"I know it's a lot to ask—it's a lot for any fellow to ask of any woman. But damn it, every woman has babies—it's what they're meant to do."

Not me! her mind cried wildly. I want to work! I want—I want——

He asked her, his eyes very bright: "Didn't you ever kind of feel like you wanted one, kid? A cute little devil playing around, getting into mischief—didn't you? Huh?"

"No."

"Well, by gosh, I have," he said. "I used to think about it before you went away—'way back then. I used to get the idea it might bring us together then. But you were so young—I'd have felt like a damn cad asking——"

"I'm so young still," she said in a tightened voice.

"You're twenty-one. That's not too young. You don't want to wait till you're twenty-five or so—you always hear it's harder the longer you wait."

"I want to wait till I want it!"

"Well, Myra says you do want it, after you start."

"But I want to want it *when* I start! Then maybe I wouldn't be so damn scared."

"What are you scared of?"

She stared at him, her lip trembling; then said: "Oh, please go away—please don't talk about it now"; and after he was gone, she put her drawing board on the floor and sat looking out the window, seeing the panorama of the future in the dimming light of the afternoon.

§ 2

THE younger officers were dragging driftwood to the fire while the rest of the party sat around the blaze. Mrs. Varks and Major Eban were holding hands under Mrs. Eban's discarded sweater.

Mrs. Varks whispered to Janet: "I wonder why the Cornwalls don't show up? Isn't he the most attractive thing?"

"Who, that Reserve captain with the nice smile?"

"Yes. Don't you think he's wonderful? All of us are simply mad about him."

"I think he's nice," she said. "But I don't think he's so specially attractive. I don't fall for that big heavy type."

"Then you must be absolutely unnatural. Every woman on the post would absolutely leave her husband for him!"

"I think he's fun. We had fun at the Willises' dinner."

"We noticed you did," Mrs. Varks said. "Oh, you little young things! It used to be Myra Chase who got all the attention. I don't know why *her* husband never took it to heart."

Dickie sat down again, brushing the log dirt from his hands, and she put her head in his lap and lay still in the sand, looking up at the stars. His hand dropped to her hair and rested there, lifeless.

Gin and ginger ale from gallon jugs was coming around the circle.

She said to Dickie: "Let's run up the beach."

"Hell, I'm tired. If you'd been out firing all day instead of in the house making pictures you'd be tired too."

"I was tired—don't you think drawing makes you tired too? But the liquor's pepped me up, and now I don't feel like sitting still."

Captain Cornwall, sitting near beside his wife, said: "I'll go for a run with you, Mrs. Blythe."

"Go ahead," Dickie said. "Take her and run her legs off."

Mrs. Varks whispered in her ear: "Watch your step, little girl!"

Back at the fire an hour later, she dropped down beside Dickie, panting and scratched and grimed from the adventure she was eager to tell about.

Dickie said: "The Pennocks are going in now. They'll take us home."

"Home?"

"Yes, I'm tired. I want to get to bed."

"But I don't want to go in yet," she cried. "It's early!"

"Well, I do," he said. "Come on—tell the Madderns good-night."

She stood braced in the sand, pulling her wrist away from him.

"I'm not going in yet!"

"Shut up!" he whispered. "I've told the Madderns we had to go! Come on now, damn it!"

"Well, I don't care what you do," she told him, "but I'm going to stay!"

Captain Cornwall said politely: "If Mrs. Blythe wants to stay out a while, we'll take her home."

Mrs. Cornwall made a queer acquiescent noise in her throat, and Mrs. Pennock said sweetly to Dickie: "Perhaps you'd rather stay after all."

He said in a throttled voice: "No, I'll go on in," and trudged off with the Pennocks through the heavy sand leading out to the cars.

Janet said something, laughing uncertainly, to Mrs. Varks, but Mrs. Varks was turned away toward Major Eban and didn't seem to hear. There was a queer suppressed atmosphere about the party that had not been noticeable before.

Dickie was lying in bed with the light on still when she tiptoed in.

"Damn you," he said, "you can go. Get out to-morrow. I'm through."

She stood in the middle of the floor in her smeared dirty bathing suit.

"It's in you," he told her, "and you can't help it, I suppose. But God damn the day I ever picked out someone like you for my wife!"

She moaned, standing with her arms at her sides: "Oh, I don't know what you're talking about, Dickie!"

"For God's sake," he said, "are you going to start lying now? At least up to now you have owned up to things—sooner or later. You damn little fool, what kind of a sap do you take me for? I suppose you were telling bedtime stories all the time you were in that barge?"

She gasped: "Do you think—we were necking?"

"Oh, for God's sake," he said in disgust.

"Do you, Dickie? Is that what's the matter? Is it?"

"I suppose you weren't," he snorted.

"We weren't! We weren't! Oh, we never even thought of such a thing! We were just having such a lot of fun exploring—oh, if I'd thought you were going to think such a thing I'd never have gone!"

"I wasn't the only one that thought it—everyone knew damn well what was up! Poor Mrs. Cornwall was trying to hold up her head."

"Oh, Dickie," she cried, "I tell you we didn't! We were both just so anxious to find a thrill of some kind, and we——"

"Well, you got it, all right."

"Dickie, I tell you I'd just felt so awful for so long, and the liquor just released me and made me forget about *us*——"

"I see it did," he said. "Damn if not."

"Dickie," she half screamed, "we didn't—we *didn't*! I'm telling the *truth*!"

She stood crying weakly, straightening her shoulders every little while to keep from slipping to the floor.

"For God's sake!" he said finally in a different tone. "Come over here."

She lurched forward and fell beside his bunk, arms thrown across him, sobbing into the bed covers.

"I didn't, Dickie, I swear, I swear! I never thought of it at all! Mrs. Varks said how attractive he was, and I said I didn't think so, I just thought he was nice, and I do—that's all, just nice and a good sport—and you said you wouldn't go running with me, and he said he would, and I was glad someone would, and we had such fun trying to get the zep flyers to come down and have a drink, and we didn't realize how far we were running, and when we came back he said he'd like to be a pirate, and I said let's capture the scow! And that's how it happened, and neither of us ever thought of anything but discovering a dead man or hidden treasure, and it was so hot and close and dirty we could hardly breathe, and we had to go slowly on account of the slipperiness and the beams and the nails and the places to fall down, and when we finally got out we parked a minute on top to cool off and get our breath, and then we came straight back to the fire. And that's the *truth*—you ask him to-morrow, and he'll tell you the same thing!"

He lay barely breathing. Then he ran his hand through her hair, gripping it hard.

"I'm sorry, kid."

"Oh, that's all right, Dickie."

"But hell, you were gone so long, and in the damned thing all by yourselves."

She crept up beside him in her snagged, grimed bathing suit, and he held her face between his hands and kissed her lips over and over.

"Poor darlin'. Poor little innocent misjudged darlin'."

After a while he said: "But damn it, though—whether you did or not doesn't change it so far as the post goes. It'll be all over to-morrow—just how it looked at the time."

"Oh, I know—I know——"

"You ought to have thought of that—how it must be looking to people. No matter how innocent you knew you were yourself."

"Oh, but I'm so *tired* of people."

"I know, so am I. But we've still got to think about 'em."

"If I had necked somebody else's husband," she said, her voice rising, "I wouldn't be the only one on the post! Myra knows! She knows about beach parties last summer—she knows which

ones are the worst hypocrites! We both know, but we don't help pass it around like the rest do! And it's those that have done it and still do it when they get a chance that will be the first to talk about me!"

"Sure, and the women all think Cornwall's so great, and he hasn't given any of 'em a tumble. They'll pull you to pieces all the quicker on account of that."

Taps came out of the night, and she fell to crying all at once on his breast. The call came a second time, more softly, and as the final full sweet note ebbed away she sobbed in utter heart-break, crying against his cheek and his lips and his hair: "Oh, Dickie, let's get out of the army!"

"Get out of the—— For God's sake, kid!"

"Oh, I mean it! Let's go some place different where we can live our own lives together and love each other in peace!"

"Wait a second—don't go knocking the wind out of me! Gosh, I thought you were so nuts about the army!"

"Oh, I was, but you know it isn't the same, Dickie, any more! The part of it that was our lives when we were little kids—that's what I loved—I see that now—and that's just gone. At least there's such a little of it left—just the calls and the flag—and sometimes the old kind of soldier—like a ghost. Oh, that's what all those old things are now, Dickie—just ghosts—and it's like it is to go on loving someone dead!"

He said: "It is pretty different from when we were kids—bumming around the corral and playing with the soldiers and driving the mule teams. By gosh—I'd been kind of forgetting about those old days myself."

"We were so free! Oh, I always thought then it could never change—I thought it would always be my life like then."

"It caught us once, kid, then. That time you said you reminded your dad about at Jonathan Wayde—when we'd been riding in the woods."

"That once—oh, I know. If we could only have been able to see then that that was just a forecast of what it was going to be."

She said then, pleading, holding his face against hers: "We'll never have a *chance* to be happy, Dickie, as long as we stay. Oh,

don't you see? Oh, it's what's made *all* our trouble from the start, because hating it so underneath has made me do the things I've done when I got tight! I know that now! And it's—underneath, it's what made me go away!"

"Gosh, kid," he said after a little while, "what could I do in cit life?"

"Why—anything. You're not dumb!"

"I'm not dumb, maybe, but what the hell am I trained to be but an officer? They didn't teach me anything at the Point that'd help me get a job outside. I'd be lucky if I managed to pick up something at twenty or twenty-five a week—God knows what it'd be. And we'd have rent to pay out of that—half of it, probably—and light, and fuel bills, maybe, and higher grocery bills besides. And promotion slower even than it is now, by gosh, and the danger all the time of getting fired. We won't get Class B'ed where we are unless we're damn worthless, and I guess we know our job well enough not to worry much about that."

"But I'd help out! I'd work too!"

"Sure, and make more than I could—I couldn't stand that, kid."

"But only till you got started and on your feet."

"I never would get on my feet outside—nope, this is my job right here that Uncle Sam taught me to hold."

"But there's no future in the army any more, Dickie! Everybody says that nowadays! It isn't like it used to be in the old days when it really was a glorious career! The only men that really get any place nowadays are on the outside!"

"Maybe so, but it's the cit colleges that are training 'em to do it. Nope, kid, it's too late to think about getting out now. If I'd thought about it seven years ago—but by gosh, I grew up with the army in my blood, just like you did."

"But some boys do get out and get ahead!"

"Sure, sometimes, when they fall into some swell opportunity from a friend of their dad's or somebody, outside—somebody that doesn't mind teaching 'em the business from the bottom up."

He said then, smoothing her hair back from her face: "We know what we'll be making twenty years from now, kid—

there's that. We know, by gosh, we won't be out in the cold, because we won't get kicked out unless there's another hell of a cut, and maybe not even then. And if there was another war we might get to be captains."

After a while she took off her bathing suit and went in her pajamas to a back room to put it over the clothes rack. The sentry coming down the back road was a patient ghost passing in the night.

He came in at noon next day looking so ill and broken that she cried out when she saw him.

He said: "It's around the post, all right."

They sat on one of the bunks together, her arm around his shoulders.

"God, the looks! I had to go over to the mess to see one of the Reserve fellows, and—oh, God, Jan——"

"It's the way they pretend they're trying not to look—" he said then—"the women. And the men all look sorry for me."

"Oh, it'll blow over——"

"The hell it will. They'll quit talking about it maybe when someone else pulls something to grab their attention, but they'll remember just the same. And if you dance with him or talk to him at a dinner or say 'hello' to him on the street—it'll mean you're in love with him. I know."

"I won't go out."

"If you don't they will think you've got a guilty conscience and don't want to face 'em. You've got to go, damn it, just the same!"

She sat close to him, miserable, trying to think of something else to say.

"They've been gloating over our not getting on," he said, "for a month now. They're probably hashing over those old things that happened too, last year. Sometimes, by God, I get to thinking they know so much they even know about you—in New York. Sometimes it seems they'd like to give you credit for doing worse than neck!"

She sat very still, wanting to scream; patting his shoulder gently.

"Kid," he said, "there's one thing we can do. Maybe it'd be

the best way to solve things—maybe it'd be just as good as getting out. We can transfer, by gosh, even if we can't get out! How'd you like that?"

"Transfer?"

"Sure! Let's do it, Jan. Let's thumb our noses at this God damn Coast Artillery and get away from it for good!"

"Oh, but—but it'd be the same in anything as long as we stayed in."

"No, it wouldn't, because we'd be among all new people! We'd be making a brand-new start! Nobody'd have anything on us, and, by gosh, we'd see they didn't get anything—see?"

She took her arm from his shoulders and put her hand to her throat, getting up to go to stand at the window. "Oh, we'd hate the Infantry or the Field—hot dirty inland posts!"

"We wouldn't take the Infantry—we'd take the Ordnance! I'd like it, by gosh—I've thought about it before. And coming home from the mess just now I thought about it again, and thought maybe it might be the thing to get us out of all this. You'd like it too, Jan, no kiddin'! It's a good branch—they've got good stations. And it's a pretty broad-minded outfit besides, from what you hear."

She leaned on the window, her forehead on her arms. "It'd seem so queer."

"I know, but you wanted to get out altogether, and that'd seem queerer. I know—the C. A. C.'s all I've ever known too. But——"

"Oh, I know—I know. I just thought—staying in at all—not to see crossed guns and red hat cords——"

"I know," he said, clearing his throat, "but that's just God damn sentiment. Hell, the Ordnance is a better branch. They've got more money—we wouldn't be living in a weather-beaten stable like this."

She came back to him and put her head on his shoulder, sighing, her hands in her lap.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind, Dickie. All right, go ahead—put in for it. I guess it is—best."

He drew her close to him. "We'd make a new start, kid. A real start this time. Because you'd do what I asked, then. Wouldn't you—darlin'?"

The peace his arms had brought to her weariness went away. "Oh, later, Dickie—yes, maybe—afterwards—not right off——"

She was alone then: his arms taken away.

"You said—and you admitted you said—you wanted to do anything in your power to make me happy."

"I did—I do want to! But not *that*, please, Dickie—not yet."

"When, then?"

"Oh, I don't know—a year or two, maybe."

Elouisa was calling for lunch. He left her to stand looking out of the window.

"You're not much of a wife—not much of a *woman*."

"Oh, Dickie," she cried, "why aren't I enough for you—just me? You're all *I* want—ever."

"Yes," he said, "it's looked like that. It's looked like it."

After he had gone downstairs she came out and lay on one of the bunks, listening again to the sound of his knife and fork, and Elouisa coming and going through the squeaking pantry door.

MYRA and Bob were genuinely sad.

"It's dreadful to think of you two going away. I don't know what Bob and I'll ever do without you here. I really hoped it wouldn't be approved."

"Yeah, we've got kind of used to you now," Bob said. "We'll miss you like the devil."

The fragrance of the sea and the waning summer coming in the car's sides was poignant as memory. The little launches, thinning in number now, lay on the scintillant bay like white shells turned up to the moon.

"You'll be too busy planning a welcome in a little while to be missing anybody," Dickie said.

"You won't be here to see Miss Darling Myra Junior Chase," Myra mourned.

"Maybe we could write and ask her to make it a little sooner," Bob said. "To meet a couple of friends."

"I don't think she would. She's got her mind made up, and she's such a very determined young lady."

"We could tell her we won't be home in November, unless she makes it early."

"She might get mad then and not come at all."

Myra's head was on Bob's shoulder as he drove, and his cheek against her blowing hair.

Dickie said, leaning out of a corner of the rear seat: "Smells like it used to at Jonathan Wayde to-night."

"Sort of."

She leaned her head back against the seat top, breathing in with a strange sharp grief the living night.

They stood on the porch, lingering against their will in the night's reminiscent sweetness.

"Let's buy another Liz when we go, and drive South."

"Buy it with what?"

"Oh, hell, we could manage somehow—we'll finish up the hundred to the bank next month. We could pick up an old bus cheap—eighty-five or so this time of the year—and pay for it on the eternity plan, as usual."

"We'll owe another dinner before we leave. And both the bridge clubs."

"Oh, well, to hell with it, anyhow. I just thought it might be—an investment. For our new start," he explained, and she knew how he looked from his voice.

"It'd be a straw," he said. "We'd ought to grab at anything now. Or don't we care any more if we drown?"

"I do care. But it just seems—so—hopeless."

He said after a few moments, in the flat tone that had come to be his usual voice during the past month: "Maybe we didn't start back far enough this time. Maybe we'd ought to have gone back to Jonathan Wayde—to our old Saturdays."

She thought, remembering suddenly, with a chilling bitterness: Oh, yes—that was what our marriage was going to be—all our life long.

Dickie said: "Maybe we could find our old selves in liquor again. For a night, anyway. It'd be worth it—even for a night."

"We've had liquor."

"I mean—together—like the old days. With the Liz—just like it used to be."

She didn't answer, and he said to the stars and the bay: "Another old cock-eyed battered buggy like the old one, and oyster-shell roads again maybe where we're going, and a bottle of good old throat-scorching Dixie corn. And maybe a country club some place—and go park outside under the trees—and neck . . ."

Scenes and the scent and the feel of the past all came riding by on a single waft of the night. She sat down on the steps, her head bowed on her knees.

"Do you think it could be done—huh?"

"I don't know."

"If we got tight enough," he said, "it might work."

He added then with a certain grim bitterness: "Maybe a Ford brings people together too."

§ 2

AND now all the launches and yachts were gone and winter was coming again, and the shivering gulls were crying out against the November chill.

She trudged until her legs would go no farther, and dropped onto the cold sand, her head down toward the sea, dizzily watching the water reaching up and falling back and reaching again.

If it would come up and get me, she thought, and take me away and help me find some kind of freedom—from love above all; some kind of ultimate peace.

Roused by the cold after a while, she saw across the fort that the sun had already gone into the bay, and got up and plodded back through the slipping sand around the batteries' curve, and finally, wearily, went between the crates on the dried grass, up the gray peeling steps.

She was asleep on her bunk when she heard him say in a turbulent dream: "Well, for God's sake, how about getting ready?"

Drugged with fatigue, she knew that he was standing in his bathrobe at the foot of the bunk.

"Hey! It's seven o'clock! You've got an hour to get dressed and get your dinner and get to the mine wharf!"

She groaned and fell back on her face across the bed.

"Oh, you're tired, I suppose," he said. "Well, what'd you go and get yourself all pepped out for when you knew you had to go? What did you go out at all for—you'd been working hard packing all day!"

She lay still and he said: "Come on now, damn it, show some signs of life! The mine planter goes at eight sharp, and we can't keep it waiting!"

She was in her leaden sleep again when he came back from finishing shaving. He shook her, and she clung to him.

"Oh, no, no, Dickie—I can't!"

"Can't, hell! The whole post has got to! It's a reception to the Chief of Coast Artillery, and it's compulsory—I told you this morning!"

"Oh, I wouldn't care if it was a reception to God!"

He let her fall back and stood glaring down at her, trying to pin his collar ornaments on his blouse.

"Oh, Dickie," she said, "I've been so damn good for seven months and gone to everything—just for you—so we'd get along. But we can't seem to get along anyhow—if I thought it'd keep us from fighting—in the future besides just to-night—why, I'd go now too—even if I am so tired I feel almost dead. I went willingly before—no matter how I hated it—because I wanted to do what you wanted—because—because I loved you."

"And now there's not much inspiration any more?" he said after a long while.

She lay still for another long while, her face hidden in her arms. Then she whispered, "No"; and he stood a moment longer, his blouse crumpled on the side of her bunk, and wheeled and got the rest of his uniform from the closet and went out of the room.

She lay listening to the rustling sounds of his dressing. After a while he went into the hall and down the stairs and she heard him shut the front door and go striding out the walk.

They ate lunch across from each other silently, starting at Elouisa's footsteps and at the squeaking of the pantry door.

Once when Elouisa came in Dickie said: "It was a good party. Wish you'd been able to come along." And she replied, grimacing at him with a fleeting mocking smile: "Yes, I'm sorry I had to miss it."

When Elouisa went out they ate in silence again, looking down at their plates.

He started to get up finally, but glancing at the kitchen sat down again and stayed looking out over the parade ground at the old mule-drawn commissary wagon jogging along the macadamed barracks road worn in holes by the trucks.

She rose presently and went upstairs alone, taking her drawing board out of the closet and to the bedroom window, propping it against her knees.

She heard him coming up the stairs then. He came in and lay down on his bunk, hands shading his eyes from the sun.

The scratching of her pencil filled the room; the mantel clock was packed.

After a while he said: "Everybody asked about you."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said you had a bad headache."

"I'd rather you'd told the truth."

"Oh, what the hell, Jan!"

"I don't want to pretend any more—that's all."

"Is that why you—why you said you didn't give a damn about me any more—last night?"

Her pencil went on scratching.

"Is it, Jan?"

"When did I say that?"

"You know when you did. When you said you—used to love me but there wasn't much inspiration any more."

She said: "You said that."

"Yes, but you answered. You know what you said. Did you mean it?"

She drew with intense concentration, frowning at her sketch.

"Jan. Was that the truth? Huh?"

She shook her head, throwing a broken lead across the room into the fire.

"Oh, Lord," he shuddered. "Where are we heading anyhow?"

Tears fell on her paper. She brushed at them, and they smeared across her design.

"My own darlin'—" he whispered, hands over his eyes—"what's become of you?"

"What's become of *you*?" she choked.

"For God's sake, let's get the Liz! Have a Saturday party tomorrow—here—before we go—try to wipe out these damn memories——"

"Oh, go ahead—I'll help—whatever I make—can go for it too."

He lay on his bunk sobbing dryly. She put her cheek down on her arms on her drawing board and whimpered in the despair of a frightened child, looking out at the cold quiet noon.

§ 3

AMONG the crates and boxes and the soldier packers a brisk ghost moved; a small busy ghost with excelsior in her blond

hair. And in the doorway a little girl ghost lingered, bewildered and brave and sad.

Out front behind the olive-drab truck being loaded, other ghosts stood. Ghosts of wagons and ghosts of brown mules. Ghosts of an old queer carriage and two stamping bays.

She thought, standing at a window listening to the scuffling feet and the scrape and squeak of the last crate over the old scarred floors: Whether you're glad or sorry, leaving is always sad.

She watched the loaded truck off up the road and lay down for a while, drowsing in exhaustion. Band music bursting across the afternoon woke her, and she put on her coat and went through the bare house.

She sat down on the back steps to watch parade, that had been a commonplace all her life, thinking: Maybe I'll never hear that march again. Except if I ever get to go see Mom and Dad.

The Colors came by, and she stood up, her heart flooding with the old wild proud tears. She fought them down from her swelling, aching throat.

She thought: I've seen the flag go by a thousand times and always felt like this; and I'll go on feeling like this till I die.

The troops marched away, and civilian cars whirled off; the parade ground was empty again, and mess call rang out of the hushed afternoon.

A Ford was coming down the back road, and she got up, waving. It stopped at the house, and Dickie jumped out.

"Well, here's the old boat!"

"It looks nice."

"Motor's running great. She's a good Liz."

She stood looking at the Ford while he fished a package out of the rear seat.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing—it looks nice."

"It ought to," he said.

They went into the house, the package under his arm making a liquid sound. He held it to her ear.

In the hall he stood staring at the stripped rooms with a queer expression on his face, following her then to the bare upstairs.

Dinner was late because Elouisa had come down from the third story and seen the bare house and gone back to her room and wept.

They ate finally off white quartermaster plates, laughing with strained enthusiasm over unfunny jokes: feeling a tense, desperate resoluteness inside.

Once Elouisa came in from the kitchen sniffing. "Reckon you-all be gone dis time to-morrow."

"Oh, yes, we'll be getting off in the morning early, Elouisa," Janet said.

At last they left the table. On the stairs he took her hand. "Well, kid——"

They smiled at each other.

We've gotten like strangers, she thought. Hopeful, desperate strangers.

He came into the bedroom with an old shiny serge suit that she had not seen since their marriage.

"Might as well do it all the way," he said. "Hey, kid, haven't you got that old big scarf you used to take along that we used to camouflage the hooch in?"

"No—it went on the truck."

She lay down on her bunk. "I want to rest a little while before we go. I feel shot from the packing."

"Damn it, I wish I could have been around more to help."

"Oh, that's all right."

She remembered then. "That scarf didn't go on the truck, either. I gave it to Elouisa day before yesterday. I think she's got it put away. You could go ask her to lend it back to us till to-morrow."

He went down to the kitchen. Stirring nervously then, she saw the last *Army and Navy News* on the window sill between the bunks. She picked it up, open to *Births, Marriages, and Deaths*.

The first item in the *Marriages* section was Burke. Burke-Hyde. The item said:

Married at Fort Winfield Simms, San Francisco, Calif., Sept. 19, 1924, Miss Elsa Elizabeth Hyde, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard R. Hyde, of Cincinnati, Ohio, to Lt.

Thomas Burke, USA, son of Col. Russell B. Burke, USA, and Mrs. Burke.

She let the magazine fall to the floor, feeling a rocketing chill. She thought: But I'd thought he was married long ago! Then why should it make me feel like this now?

She lay staring up at the ceiling, confused by a sense of an inexplicable vague void.

The air was slightly warmer again, with the feel of approaching rain. They sat at each other's side stiffly, looking out at the black fleeting trees.

"Swell night."

"Yes. It's a good thing it's warm."

He said: "They're having some kind of a birthday celebration up at the bachelor quarters for Deac Parsons."

"Yes, they called up."

"Well—we'll have a better time."

The only light on the twisting road up the spit came from the clouded stars.

"How about it, huh?"

"All right."

He stopped the Ford. The liquor, wrapped in Elouisa's scarf, was on the seat between them. She tipped the quart bottle to her lips and choked.

"Don't let it throw you."

"Oh—it tastes—*terrible!*"

"Hell, this is chocolate soda compared to the rat poison we used to guzzle."

"Well, I'm not in practice any more."

He took it from her and drank, making a face too. They wrapped the bottle up again and started on. The lingering taste made her feel sick. She leaned into her corner of the seat.

"Looks kind of like the road to the ferry, at that—if you look at it that way," he said.

"A little."

The guardhouse at the gate came into view fifteen minutes later.

"Want another before we get outside?"

"All right."

They stopped in the shadows of the swamp grass. She gulped and lay back with her hands over her face, shuddering. He drank and they went on.

Driving through the town, she said: "I don't think liquor ever hits you again like your very first drunks. I never have felt again the way I used to on our old parties when I wanted to grin at everybody along the road."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care."

"We'll get out on some road again and have another shot."

After a while the houses were left behind.

"Take a big one this time," he said. "We want to get *tight*."

He took the bottle away from her then. "For God's sake! Do it like this——"

He let the liquor run down his throat, making a glugging noise, and handed the bottle back.

"I don't want any more."

"Go on, you didn't get hardly any."

"Yes, I did. I don't want any more now, I say."

"Well, hell—if you're not going to *try* to get tight——"

"Well, I can't stand that rotten stuff! Go in some place and get me something for a chaser!"

"A chaser!"

"Well, you know I'm not used to it straight lately!"

"Neither am I, but I'm getting mine down all right."

"Well, I don't claim to be as hard-boiled as you."

"*Can't* you get along? We'll have to go back to town again!"

"What if we do? We haven't any other place to go!"

Driving away from the town once more, half an hour later, he said: "I hope you're satisfied now."

They stopped again away from the houses, and he said: "Take a good one now, for God's sake."

She handed him back the gin, taking down her soda pop in frantic gulps.

He sneered: "If your old ghost could see you now!"

They drove ahead aimlessly.

"Well, what do you want to do—huh?"

"Oh—just go on driving."

"What the hell—we'll have enough of driving to-morrow. I thought we were going to park."

"Well, go ahead—park."

"You're a big help, aren't you?" he said.

She lay in her corner, thinking: Oh, if we just bought it to come out and fight . . .

After several miles he said in an unsteady voice: "Damn it, we've started bad."

The liquor was spreading a tingling warmth, but not a happy warmth. A vague cheated sense of frustration made her want to cry.

He said: "Come over here, kid," and she hitched in the seat and tipped her forehead against his shoulder, leaning from where she sat. He put his arm around her, patting her head.

Presently he said: "Take another shot," and she obeyed, holding the wheel then while he drank.

"By gosh, we'd ought to start feeling it after *that* one!"

She knew after a few moments by looking out at the whizzing signboards that she was tight now.

She murmured: "I think I'm going to have a crying jag."

"Oh, for God's sake."

He pushed the bottle toward her. "Take another and snap out of it."

She shook her head.

"Hell, let's give it up and go back."

"Oh, no, no—wait——"

He slowed down, taking another drink. "Well, by gosh, I'm going to get tight!"

She took the bottle when he finished and drank again, pouring her soda pop after the gin.

They rode on a long way in silence, and looking over the Ford's side she knew that she was very tight.

She asked timidly: "Don't you feel yours yet?"

"Hell, yes!"

She crept closer to him and took his arm from the wheel and put it around her, crouching against his side. "Now let's park somewhere."

"Oh, you think you're tight enough now, huh?"

"Oh, if you won't try too . . ."

He took his arm away to steer past a truck lumbering in the middle of the road. "All right. We'll park."

Radio music was coming out of a side road, and he swerved the wheel and followed the sound, jerking the hand brake on a little dirt road jutting to the right.

"How's this? Right to order, huh?"

The night was quiet but for the radio strains coming from the restaurant behind them. She felt a queer embarrassment, and peered out the Ford's window at the whirling lights.

"Gosh—I'm tight."

"That's swell."

He took hold of her arm. "Turn around—do the way you used to."

She curled up in the seat facing him, and he put his arms around her. They looked at each other dizzily through the dark.

He kissed her, and her lips, warm from the liquor, were unresponsive under his.

He let her back against his knee, looking at her closed eyes. "What's the matter? Isn't it any use, Jan?"

Tears were starting down her cheeks. "Oh, I—feel awful——"

He held her silently while she cried softly. "Take another shot," he said.

"No, I don't want any more! I hate it! I've had too much now!"

He stirred, letting his arms fall away from her, and she lay back on the steering wheel.

He sighed: "I guess there just isn't any kick to necking any more after you've been married."

Unsolicited, a certain intruding memory caught at her heart, and she slipped down on the seat beside him. Memory passed, and she said maudlinly: "I'll go away! You don't want me any more, so I'll get out!"

He said: "You might as well. If you're going to go on glooming around like you've been doing—what the hell chance have we had to make a decent start with you moping and blubbering around ever since you got back, acting as if you wished to hell you never had come back——"

"I do wish I never had come back!" she flung drunkenly. "I had what I wanted in New York——"

"Sure, a lot of other guys to neck!"

"I didn't want that! I just wanted freedom and I had it!"

"What do you call freedom? For God's sake, answer me that!"

"Why, not having to think about people or be responsible to anyone but myself, and being able to go to the kind of parties I like when I like, and not having to give any myself if I don't want to, and earning my own money, plenty of it, and having what I need for myself and not being in debt——"

"Damn it, we're out of debt now! All except the Liz."

"Yes, the Liz now! You know we never should have got it, to hold us down for another y——"

"For God's sake, you know why we did!"

"Well, we might have known it wouldn't work!"

"You didn't kick a hell of a lot when I suggested getting it!"

"I didn't know you were going to get such a good one—we didn't need——"

"If we make the trip in it to Georgia we've got to have one that'll hold together! And it'll make money for us on mileage."

"Yes, how much? And I didn't kick because I thought I might as well see my money go into something I could enjoy instead of the silverware you wanted to get! I don't want silverware—I don't give a damn whether we ever have silverware or not!"

"Well, you'd ought to give a damn! We can't go on borrowing from neighbors forever! We've got to own our own stuff for our own house some time!"

"But I'm not interested in owning my own stuff for my own house! I'm not interested in silver and linen and dishes and furniture when I need clothes more, or even anyway whether I need clothes or not! I don't want to see the little bit of money we've got together go into stuff for entertaining when I hate entertaining so! Why should we buy stuff for the benefit of people we don't give a damn about and that talk about us and make our lives miserable when there are things we need for ourselves so much more?"

"Because you know they'll talk about us worse if we don't!

And once we're in the swim we've got to keep on and keep up our part!"

"Well, we never should have got in! We never——"

"How could we keep out of it forever? And anyhow, what the hell makes you think you're so good you can't associate with anybody else?"

"I *don't* think I'm so good, but I can't *stand* the gossiping, and hypocrisy and pettiness of it all! I've been away now living my own life and earning my own money, and it seems worse to me than ever, coming back to it! It isn't like this in New York! There isn't any hypocrisy! Everybody does what they damn please and nobody judges anybody else—nobody *cares*! I can't *stand* this again now after having real living! I can't——"

"Quit yelling!"

"I can't *stand* not having my own money any more to do——"

"Damn it, shut up! You've got your own money—by God, you can *keep* it for yourself!"

"You never have appreciated it anyway, the little bit I've earned for us! You've considered my work a plaything for me and a nuisance for you when I had it to do when you wanted to go calling——"

"If you don't shut up, I'll shut you up! Do you want the cops after us? Shut up now, till I get us the hell out of here! Understand?"

She crouched babbling, while he backed the Ford out and swung it toward the main road.

"I don't want to make a home! I'm not domestic and I'm not a home-maker!"

"You'd want a home if you had a family to make it for!"

"I wouldn't! I wouldn't! I'm not maternal either!"

He said: "When you came back you said you wanted to do anything in your power to make me happy—to make up to me for all you'd done. You said it then and you said it later, a bunch of times. But when I asked you to do the simplest thing——"

"The simplest thing! You said yourself it was a lot to ask!"

"The most logical thing, then! The most natural thing any wife could be expected to do——"

She babbled drunkenly: "A maternal one maybe! But I'm not maternal! And it's just selfish of you to expect it of me when you know how little my hips are—if you really loved me the least little bit you wouldn't want me to risk my life—ever——"

"Then you don't mean to have one—ever?"

She wailed: "No, I don't! I won't! I *won't* give up my youth and health and looks to a nasty little brat that I don't want and never will want! And if that's all you want a wife for then you better go look for another that's got a little less pride!"

"Well, I guess," he said, "if you're not a home-maker and not maternal you're *not* much of a wife. And I'd just as soon find someone else that would be—that'd have babies for me to prove she loved me."

He said, "God damn," and picked up the bottle lying between them in the scarf and held it, spilling, to his lips while the Ford veered from side to side across the road.

She had to half-carry him up the stairs, slapping him in the face, and he vomited in the bathroom. She threw him across his bunk then, and he lay mumbling, his arm swinging over its side. His hand hit the *Army and Navy News*, where she had dropped it between the bunks, and he threw it at her in the bathroom, where she was getting a cloth to wash his face.

"Your frien' Burke goes t' Panama! Did'j' know that?"

"No," she said, stopping in the bathroom door.

"Better go down an' pay li'l' visit t' Mom an' Dad—huh?"

She picked the magazine up and turned its pages, feeling sober all at once. "Where?—I didn't see that—I just saw about his marriage."

He sat up, and said with most of the drunkenness in his speech suddenly gone: "So you did see that before we went out, and that's why you cried all over the place and couldn't neck me! So you *have* loved him all the time! Well, by God——"

She said, standing, white, before him: "Yes, I did think about him—when you said there wasn't any kick in necking after you'd been married! I couldn't help remembering how *we'd* been at Jonathan Wayde—when it was so sweet still! But I didn't think about him because I loved him."

"Not because—— Oh, for Christ's sake!"

She said piteously: "Oh, I can't explain! I don't understand, myself, the way I feel about him! But I *don't* love him—I swear I don't, and haven't any of this time, and I don't think ever really did, compared to——"

He cut her off: "The hell you didn't! That's why you've made our marriage the mess it's been! That's why you were so crazy to get back to Jonathan Wayde last year! I knew he'd got Coast and would be there, but I trusted you, and you've lied the whole time! You lied at the start, damn you, you married me because you wanted to get away from Mom and didn't even have the decency to wait till he graduated! Well, by God——"

She started to scream: "But I wasn't going to get away from Mom, I was going to Europe with her for exactly as long as it would have taken him to graduate!"

But the telephone rang.

She said over it: "Yes! We just got in! . . . Yes—yes—all right, I will! . . . No, he's too tight. . . . Oh, that doesn't matter! . . . Yes, all right—I'll be out back!"

When she returned he had gone into a drunken sleep. She stood a moment looking down at him, with defiance and triumph and pain and pity and contempt all in her face; then picked up her coat and tiptoed from the room and down the stairs and out to the back porch.

Stumbling in again hours later, she stood by his bunk, trying to see only one of him lying there asleep.

She shook him, slapping him hard in the face till he blinked up at her through the gray morning light.

"For God's sake—where've you been?"

"Out," she said. "At Deac's party. And I've necked again."

He groaned, rolling away from her and pulling the covers over his head.

Her drunken mind shrieked on: And that isn't all I've done! I've *had an affair* in New York and come back to you again, and you were too dumb to know what I meant when I told you, and I'm *glad*, I'm glad now I cheated, since you're too dumb to know when I'm square too!

Falling across her own bunk she went to sleep with her

clothes on, while the new day seeped around the shades into the room.

Rain coming in the window woke her, and she was so sick that she thought she was dying. She dragged to the bunk's edge, trying to hold up her face to the cold blowing drops.

Sagging across the side of the bunk then, groaning, she saw his putteed legs in the bedroom door.

"Just what do you expect me to do this time, Jan?" he asked in a hard voice; hard even for his bitter self of the past month.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't care," she moaned. "But you can't kick me out, because I'm going—myself."

The silence was a looming thing between them.

"Well, I guess we did make our sentiments pretty clear last night," he said. "*In vino veritas.*"

"Yes."

He said then: "Who was it you necked this time?"

"Oh, what difference does it make?"

He shrugged, leaning in the doorway.

She said: "You'll have to lend me money, but I'll pay it back right away—as soon as I get started again on my job."

"That's all right."

"Will you take me as far as New York?"

"I don't go through New York."

"Oh."

"I can go as far as Staten Island. It isn't much out of the way. I can drop you off there."

"Thanks."

He stayed standing in the doorway, and she told him, writhing in her sick misery: "I'm fed up, anyway. I want to live my own life again."

"Well," he said, "I kind of wouldn't mind living mine too."

After a little while he said: "It's too bad, though, to have to remember that it was a thing like this that finally separated us for good. Liquor——"

"Why not?" she flung. "It was liquor that brought us together in the first place."

Bob and Myra stood on their porch with their arms around each other, waving.

Back farther on another porch Elouisa stood, crying into her apron still.

Rolling through the rain out the road from the post, Janet thought, relief breaking over her like a strong warm wave: Our last ride together.

Across the blowing swamp grass the sun was just dipping into the melancholy bay.

It was colder, a hint of sleet in the rain.

She thought, shivering: I wish I were going South too—to get away from the winter.

The road stands were bleak and barred; nailed shut. The billboard bathing girls were streaked and weathered; one of them, sitting on a sign corner, pointed cheerfully still with the stump of a faded splintered arm.

Passing through a town, Dickie said—the first either had spoken since the post: "I'm hungry again. Are you?"

"Gosh, no."

"Well, I am. Hungry as hell."

He pulled up to a curb and went into a restaurant, and she sat alone in the Ford, half sick still, huddled in her corner, watching the rain; shivering in the growing cold.

All at once, then, looking at his back where he sat at a table just inside a wide glass front, she thought: Oh, I don't want us to part for good like *this*.

He came out, and they drove on, the miles flickering under wheel. The lights came on along the road.

After a while he nodded up ahead at a group of lights just visible through the mist. "There's Tottenville."

"What's that?"

"That's where you take the ferry to."

"Oh. Then what do I do?"

"Take the train from there across the Island and take the New York ferry at the other end."

The Ford rolled on toward the group of lights. Suddenly an unutterable lonely silence came sweeping out of the rain and the dark. She put her hand to her face quickly, brushing,

turning to stare out into the rain, catching her lip in her teeth, pinching hard.

"What's the matter?" he asked, looking at her.

And as her forehead tipped against his shoulder his arm went up in a swift familiar gesture over her bowed head.

They drove on, not speaking; then he said: "I'll take you on across the Island, kid—would you like me to do that?"

She nodded, and they went on through the rain.

After a while he whispered huskily: "Better change your mind and come on along down South with me, ol'-timer."

She shook her head, drooped now against his breast.

"No, no, no—we've proved——"

"But we could try again."

Fumbling in his pocket for his handkerchief, she shook her head again.

There was a New York ferry going out in three minutes. The Ford was parked by the extra busses, and they sat with their arms around each other in a sort of crucifixion of wild futile sorrow, silently, in the dark.

"Oh, come on—we've got to go now."

"Oh, Christ, what have we done to have to suffer so!"

"I don't know, but if we stayed together we'd go on suffering!"

"But we could wipe out last night, darlin'—pretend it never happened—start again."

"Oh, no, no, I know now just like I knew before in New York that we just aren't meant to *be*——"

"But stick around to-night at least, kid! Go to a hotel and talk it over and make damn sure——"

"Oh, no, no, no, I'd rather get it over with now!"

People were running in the rain toward the turnstiles.

"Kid——"

"Oh, come on—let's *go*!"

He clutched up her suitcases and hurried after her. People were crowding each other in the swinging doors.

He tried to follow her through the turnstiles, but she put her hands against his breast.

"No, no, no, Dickie—*here*—get it over with——"

"You can't carry your suitcases!"

"Yes, I can! I can! Just slide them through."

She sobbed then, putting up her arms over the turnstile. A bell clanged and she tore away and caught up her suitcases, and an old man coming through the next turnstile, running, took them away from her, and she ran beside him, crying still, looking back.

The iron gates rolled shut, and everybody stopped running and walked down onto a red boat lying on the surface of the harbor that was a blur of gray-blue mist and far-off quivering lights.

§ 4

SHE took a taxi to a small downtown hotel that she remembered, and went up in a shaky elevator to a room and put out the light and lay down on a hard bed, alone at last with her loneliness and her heartbreak.

Crazy thoughts assailed her in the unfriendly dark. She thought: So this is how you do—die over and over again and find yourself always still living. Didn't *she* escape either—is she some place suffering still, trying to die all over again to get farther away?

Her sick feeling had passed, and she got up and opened the window and sat on its ledge, face to the blowing rain, looking out at the familiar street below.

She thought: I used to hurry along here to get home.

A forgotten scent rode by on the drenched wind: the smell of an old dim-lit hall; and with it she felt old rough banisters in her hands and old worn sloping stairs against her feet.

A man stepping out of the shadows offered her an umbrella. She shook her head and hurried on, her drawn face lifted to the stinging drops.

The streets seemed shoddier; the people on them shabbier than before. The gables of the little brick houses on Christopher Street were crookeder, their dirty panes smirched more by the rain.

She crossed and stood on the corner beside them, looking

down a single block like a little half moon, her hand clenched against her breast.

Someone was having a party in a basement, and there was loud laughing and a phonograph going.

Finally she went across the half moon and touched the railing of steps under an iron lantern gently, drawing her hand back.

She went up the steps then and touched the old loose knob of the little green paneled door, and the door pushed in, and the old queer smell of age and mustiness rushed against her face, and she leaned back on the shut door whispering, "Oh, God—God——"

She put her foot on the worn stairs at last, and touched the crooked railing, and went up, slowly, breathing in a hundred half-forgotten associations on that strange old air.

There was quiet on the first landing, where there had usually been gayety before. She climbed higher, panting, and at the top ran to the first green door, with a little cry.

There was a new knocker on it: a brass nude woman. Strangers' voices came from inside.

She leaned back against the wall, staring, her lips moving. Sobbing softly then, she went back down the stairs and out to the street and went along the half moon, turning east into the street at its end.

The rain beat upon her face, hiding her streaming tears, and she walked on into the Square.

Dead leaves lay on the paths, sodden with rain. Under a grotesque tree across the park she sank onto a wet bench.

The sad mute ghost of Viv was everywhere, and all New York breathed of a brief, futile comradeship.

After a while she got up and traversed the Square again, looking up at the cross of yellow light, misty above the rain.

Back in her hotel room she fell to her knees beside the bed crying: "Mom! Mom!"

She climbed up and lay stretched across it on her face, fingers squeezing the counterpane, moaning over and over: "Oh, Mom—Mom—oh, Mom—Mom—Mom——"

Her sobs went into shuddering sighs, and for a long time she

lay spent, as though sleeping. At length she got up dizzily and sat on the window sill.

She drew the curtains then, slowly, looking out between them until they shut out the street. Then she turned back and put on her coat and hat wearily, and went down to the lobby to a telegraph desk.

The message she wrote on a yellow pad she addressed to *Col. Custis, Quarry Heights, Canal Zone*, and the message read: *Will visit now. Send ticket money. Jan.*

She rode in the sleet then twice up along a black river and through the melancholy city, walking back to her room finally, fleeing the hovering ghosts of Washington Square.

FROM the upstairs porch of the new homestead that was like a square green box set on a high wide shelf of a hillside, all of Panama was a panorama of little bright jungled hills shaped like virgin breasts, stabbing their beauty through the heart like a slow sword.

"Well, glad you came?" Dad asked.

"Gee, yes."

"What do you think of Panama by now?"

"Oh, it's beautiful. Almost too beautiful."

"Make you think of the Philippines?"

"A little—the flowers."

"Too bad all the green'll soon be gone. Things dry up pretty brown after the rains stop."

"But it's cooler then."

"Oh, yes—get a good breeze all through the dry season."

They stood watching a white ship come along the blue river below that was the Canal, bound for the sea.

"So you think you and old Dickie can't hit it off any longer, huh?"

She shook her head.

"Well, guess it's best to find it out while you're both still young. Give you a chance to find somebody else."

"I don't want to find anybody else."

He whistled softly. "Got a good many years ahead to be lonesome in—huh?"

The white ship was slipping out of sight, its smoke floating back.

"Maybe you'll change your mind later on, huh? Find somebody you think you might make a go of it with?"

Presently he said gently: "How about old Dickie—he taking it pretty hard too?"

"Oh, it seems I can't—I don't want to talk about it—I'm sorry."

After a while another ship came along the blue from the other way; a gray ship.

"There she is!"

"Well—so long."

"Jan-nee! There's the transport!"

"I'm going!"

She ran downstairs and out to the side yard to the Buick parked under a mango tree.

The little girl with brown curls in Barbie's lap was making a sound like a baby bird and putting out her tiny hands to the Buick's wheel.

"Barbie Lou, stop, Mamma slap—damn good and hard, too. Hey, Juddy, take her back with you—*take* her or I'll dump her out! Damn! Now she's snagged my stocking again. Well, Jan, you old sinner, what are you doing here? My golly, I never got such a shock in my life as when I saw you on that pier!"

"Well, I never knew you were coming either till I got here and Dad said——"

Juddy asked: "How long you been here? Where's Dickie? Where are you—Amador?"

"Oh, no—we're not stationed here. I just got here the first of the week on a cit boat—I couldn't get transportation. I'm visiting Mom and Dad."

"Oh, you lucky dog. I haven't had a vacation since I've been married."

"What do you mean, *you* haven't?" Juddy said.

"My family's still in the P. I. They've never even seen Barbie Lou."

"Gosh, Barbie, it seems so funny—I can't get used——"

"What—Barbie Lou? Oh, you will. Say, you haven't any——"

"Gosh, no!"

"Barbie wishes she hadn't," Juddy said.

Barbie Lou was whimpering and stepping smudges on the toes of her father's white canvas shoes. Barbie clapped her hands together.

"Barbie Lou, stop! Juddy, slap her face! Well, all right, if you want your only white shoes to look like a coal heaver's!"

"Plenty of white shoe polish, isn't there, Juddy?" Dad said.

"Why, yes, sir." Juddy, in the porch swing beside Janet, took his daughter onto his knees.

Barbie wailed: "I don't know what's the matter with her! She's just acted like the dickens the whole trip, and now she's worse than ever, and Juddy never will let me spank her!"

"It's the heat," Mom said. "Poor baby, I expect she'll have a hard time till the cool comes. Do be patient with her poor little troubles, Barbie."

"She won't be," Juddy said.

"Well, the hot season's just about over, thank heaven. It's cooler at Amador, anyway. You'll love Amador."

"Who's there now?" Juddy asked. "Steve's there, isn't he?"

Dad told them: "Steve's at France Field, on the Atlantic side. He transferred last June."

"To the Air Service?"

"I'll be darned!"

Mom said: "Yes, and he certainly isn't going to last long. Everyone says he's a perfect fool about taking chances, and he's drinking like a fish, besides!"

"He'll wash out," Dad said, "before he cracks up."

"Well, I don't know—at the rate he's going!"

Barbie asked: "Have you seen him, Jan?"

"No."

"He sent her the most gorgeous box of native orchids, and she wouldn't even call the poor boy up to thank him! After all she's done to him, too!"

"And what did he do to me?"

"Well! He did the honorable thing of making you confess what you'd done, as you should have in the first place. I declare, you act as if he'd made you get married! I'm sure *that* wasn't his fault!"

"What have you got against old Steve now, Jan?" Dad. "Can't you let bygones be bygones?"

"No. It was the spirit he did it in. I let him know then I'd never forgive him, and I never will."

"Poor old Steve's had a pretty tough time."

"Why, everyone *knows* Janet's simply ruined his life! Everybody called his transferring just an honest suicide!"

"Gosh, I never could understand Steve doing what he did when he did love Jan so much. He must have been tight as the dickens that night."

"Oh, he wasn't so tight."

"Well, she was a very deceitful girl, Barbie, and Steve was far more honorable than she. I declare, I can't see what she ever got married for, anyway, if she was so anxious not to live with her husband then and says she's left him for good now."

"Jan! Have you?"

"Oh, Mom——"

"Jan, you haven't!"

"She won't talk about it, Barbie. She won't tell you why or anything. She's just perfectly unnatural. Heavens, after coming all this way to see her father and mother, especially after not seeing them for so long, you would think she'd want to spend a little time with them and not act as if she prefers her own society to everyone else's!"

"She's different," Barbie said. "She's gotten so quiet and serious. What's the matter with you, Jan? Gosh, you didn't take marriage seriously, did you?"

"She won't even go out. Heavens, in Panama, of all places, where there's so much going on for a normal girl to love to do. So many parties and so many attractive men, and the navy, and everything! I've *told* her she doesn't need to go to card parties if she doesn't want to, but she certainly should get out to the club dances that all the young people go to. And everybody's been asking for so long when she was coming, and everyone's so anxious to see her—she's had two invitations already to dinners, and she won't go—I don't know what people are going to think!"

"Gosh, Jan, what's the matter with you? If you really are free again, I should think you'd be r'arin' for a wild time!"

"And with her mother to do her entertaining for her—I can understand how she might be tired of her own social responsibilities, but——"

"Golly, Jan, you must be goofy!"

"Maybe I am."

"Well, she always was a little queer, Barbie, goodness knows, but I never have known her to be quite like this. She positively avoids people, as if she had something to be ashamed of! Maybe she has—I'm sure people are going to *think* she has if she doesn't accept their invitations and go and enjoy a good time like other girls!"

"Aw, let her alone," Dad said. "Maybe you don't know anything about it."

"Hmph. I suppose you do. I suppose you think she's mourning over her lost love. Well, if she's so much in love with him still, why doesn't she go back to him?"

"If you want me to get out, I will!"

"Of course I don't want you to get out, but I *do* think you might make an effort to be a little more friendly and agreeable."

"Oh, she'll get over it," Barbie said. "Gosh, if you ask me, Jan, I think Steve did a lot for you when he squealed. He helped get marriage out of your system for you—you'll be a year ahead of the game, thanks to him."

Barbie Lou was asleep, her brown curls caught in her father's collar ornaments, her pink cheek against his white-uniformed breast.

§ 2

SHE drove so fast against the flooding afternoon rain that the great drops coming under the open windshield hurt her face. She drove past the last cantina and straight ahead, where the concrete swerved to the right, and on and on over the mud and ruts, past the grass huts and the vivid jungles, stopping at last when the ruts became impassable; turning back.

At the house on the hillside once more, she sat in the car in the side yard under the mango tree, hunched over the wheel still, listening to the whip of the rain on the roofs and the trees and the car top.

"Jan-nee?"

"What?"

"Where are you?"

“In the car.”

“Well, come on in!”

“I will in a minute.”

In the house Mom said: “Where on earth have you been?”

“Driving.”

“Well, for goodness’ sake, I wish you’d stop taking the car without asking me and staying away so long besides! Where do you go?”

“Oh, I just drive. What difference does it make?”

“Well—just remember who pays for the gas! Barbie’s been calling up ever since you left. Do call her up, and do see her.”

“I don’t want to see her.”

“No, I suppose you don’t. I declare, I just don’t know what has come over you. Barbie—that you’ve been so fond of ever since you were little girls! Heavens, you *are* so faithless—I’m sure I don’t understand why people are so faithful to you!”

“I told you I don’t feel like seeing anybody.”

“No—just become a hermit. Goodness knows you wouldn’t see your own mother and father if it weren’t for meals. Well, you’ll certainly have to see Barbie. Now—I don’t want any nonsense about that. I won’t have you hurting her feelings. Besides, it isn’t good for you to stay by yourself so—you’re perfectly morbid, and getting worse and worse. Heavens, if I’d had an unhappiness I certainly would be brave about it and get out among people and *show* that I wasn’t beaten by it, and *try* to put it behind me and make a fresh start and not let my life be blighted and my mind embittered toward even my best friends!”

“If I go to see Barbie I’ll have to take the car again.”

“Well, take it! I don’t mind your taking it when it’s for some purpose! But this aimless driving just to be driving—I suppose you’ve gotten it all dirty again too! Why can’t you stay on the concrete? Where on earth do you go? Goodness, as if to Old Panama and back wasn’t far enough for anybody to drive. You use up a gallon of gas each way going there! Where are you going now?”

“To call Barbie!”

“Well. I should certainly hope so.”

§ 3

A MONTH had gone, and the next transport was due from the west.

She was slipping out between the hibiscus hedges when she heard from a window: "Jan-nee! Where are you going?"

"Oh, for a walk."

"Well, the transport will be in by noon. Now I don't think you ought to go away—you always stay so long."

"Oh, I'll be back in plenty of time."

"Well, it will look very queer if you're not with me. They'll certainly both think it——"

"They don't even know I'm here!"

"Well, they'll find out, certainly."

"Well, don't worry, I'll be back."

"It's so hot, anyway—I don't think you ought to exercise when it's so hot."

"Oh, it's never hurt me yet, has it?"

She stood on a high ledge of Ancon Hill and watched the *Argonne* come in from the sea.

Her drenched clothes against her felt cold suddenly, and she shivered. She thought: Oh, you could help me now more than you ever did before, and you're married. *Married*.

She cried then, a little, for the first time in a month, alone on the hillside.

The *Argonne* came in swiftly past the fortified islands; past Amador. She ran down the spiraling road again, losing the transport from view behind the giant grass.

She stood beside Mom on the pier and saw him up on the deck, a stranger in his white, his cap on the back of his tawny head.

Mom was calling, "Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo!" and waving a handkerchief. He looked and she saw all the color go out of his tanned face.

A little dark-haired girl ducked out of the crowd and clutched his arm, glowing up at him and asking a question. He

answered her and said something else, and she stared quickly, looking frightened; then she waved too.

They all stood then, trying to shout while the ropes were made fast, and not seeming to know what to shout about.

Finally the gangplank was down and they were coming ashore.

She felt hot and faint and hung back while Mom kissed Tommy. She heard him say: "Mom, this is Elsa," and saw Mom kiss Elsa too.

He was coming to her then, his face flushed, holding out his hand. "Hello, Jannie. Gosh, I didn't know you were here."

Her eyes felt swollen from the pulsing heat. He said: "Jannie—this is Elsa."

They were in people's way, and they started off, walking together, uncertain as to who should walk with whom, up the covered pier.

§ 4

THE green was crisping now, in the absence of the rains.

The dry season breeze was so strong at times that it rolled up rugs and upset wicker chairs on the porches. At night it was calmer, making the long shredded leaves of the tall palms swish and rustle like silken petticoats, and the broad fan-like ones of the palmettos whirl and slap like the wings of prisoned birds.

The city was getting ready for Carnival. The Queen was chosen and the truck processions of singing boys and girls starting, parading all afternoon through the narrow streets. Carnival drinking was beginning, and the telephone poles in the plazas decorated and streamers already flinging and Carnival noises starting, and Carnival spirit settling down.

The navy was in, the streets white with sailors. Sailors bursting out of barrooms, singing; sailors shuffling along the sidewalks, buying monkeys and parrots and American-made scarfs: sailors packed into the touring-car taxis and pony-drawn carriages, singing, shouting, cheering: sailors vomiting at the curbs.

Dad said at lunch: "Going out among 'em for Carnival, Jan?"
"I don't know."

"What?" Mom said. "For heaven's sake, don't tell me you're actually considering it. Well, do post a notice ahead of time—it would be too much of a shock to your friends."

"I didn't say I was going."

"No—I don't suppose you will. By all means, don't—you might have a good time. You might forget for a moment your secret griefs. How you ever got so far as considering it, I don't see."

The brown jungle grass on Ancon Hill was beaten by the breeze. Little rust-colored sails were being blown about the light-green shallow bay.

She said, whispering: "Oh, I *can't* go crazy here—I can't have them know——"

The little owls were crying when Barbie came up the front steps, calling into the house.

"Hey, Jan!"

"What?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake—where are you—in the swing? What's the idea of parking out here in the dark?"

"I've got a headache."

"That's too bad. Don't you want company?"

"I don't care."

"Well, that's lucky for you, because you're going to get it. Juddy went to the smoker at the Club, so I had them drop me off."

She sat on the swing edge.

Janet asked: "What do you do with Barbie Lou when you both go out?"

"Leave her. Why?"

"I should think you'd be scared to leave her alone."

"Oh, she's asleep. The Tilsons can hear her, anyway, if she yells. Where's your mom and dad?"

"Mom's gone to the movies. Dad's at the office."

"Why don't you ever come out to the movies with Mom? She's out all the time all alone."

"I hate movies."

"You hate everything nowadays, don't you? Damn it, Jan, where the hell are you heading for, anyway?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'm sorry for you if you're really taking Dickie so hard, but I think you're a fool. You're making yourself older. You look about twenty-eight, at least. Those lines around your mouth—do you ever look at them? You ought to massage them out——"

"Oh, what difference does it make?"

"Well, believe me, it'd make a difference to me! I know I look older myself, but I've got some excuse for it—I've had a kid. And it isn't my fault we're too broke for me to have a new permanent."

Barbie's hair was straight and flat now, straggling around her thin face. Somehow, in spite of looking older, she looked more like the little girl of bike days.

"Gosh, I used to think you had guts. I never thought I'd ever see you acting like such a baby—like such a damn coward."

"You don't know anything about it."

"Well, for Pete's sake, tell me. I don't go around blabbing—you ought to know that!"

"Oh, it isn't that."

"Well, what is it? Why don't you want to go out? Just tell me that, will you?"

"Oh—I don't want to drink!"

"Don't want to drink? Good gosh, is that all? Well, don't be a cuckoo. In the first place, it'd do you good, and in the second place, you wouldn't have to if you didn't want to."

"But I would."

"Well, what of it? Damn it, it would do you good."

"Oh, no it wouldn't!"—a moan.

"What's the matter—have you lost control lately?"

She whispered after a little silence: "Yes——"

"Oh."

Barbie said in a gentler voice: "Well—everyone does a little bit now and then. What of it? What of it, Jan? What difference does it make? Specially for you—not having anybody but yourself?"

"Oh, isn't yourself the most important?"

"Not myself. Myself doesn't give a damn."

"Mine does."

"Well, I'm sorry for you, then," Barbie sighed. "You'll never get much kick out of life that way. You better start getting over that, kid."

"I never will."

After a moment Barbie said, tracing a pattern on Janet's shoulder in the dark: "I guess you and I are just different."

Janet moaned, rolling away from her: "Oh, a whole lot more different than you've got any idea."

"Well, you don't need to be so damn high-hat about it!"

"Oh, I'm not. You don't—you don't know what I'm talking about."

"No, I'm damned if I do. No fooling, Jan, I think you're going goofy."

"I am! I know I am!"

"Well, snap out of it! Anybody would, doing the way you do! You need to get out, Jan—no fooling, Mom's right! It's the only thing for what ails you—get out and meet new people and take a drink. It's the only cure for a case like yours."

"I know, I thought so once before."

"Well, what happened? You ran too wild?"

She murmured, and Barbie said: "Well, you can't here! Don't worry, how could you in the army? The army isn't New York."

Barbie pleaded then: "Come on out for Carnival, Jan. You're invited to the Marleys', aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, come on! Did Laura Pollock ask you too?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's two nights—the first is just Coronation and doesn't amount to much anyway—and the last night a bunch of us are getting up a Dutch treat party, and you can come along with any man you want. You'll find somebody you like on the first two nights."

"I don't want to find anybody."

"Oh, my gosh, you are cuckoo. But come on, will you, Jan? Will you, please? You don't have to get tight if you don't want to, but you'll be the only one not getting tight for Carnival. But if you don't want to I won't let you. I'll watch out for you and not let you get tight. But come on—come anyway the first night. Will you, Jan?"

"I don't know."

"Well, say maybe! Do you think you will maybe?"

"Oh, I don't know—I might!"

"That's the way to talk, *chica!*"

"Oh, you're picking up Spanish."

"Why not?"

"I shouldn't think you'd be able to help it."

"Is that a dirty dig?"

"Of course not. It's your own business what you do."

"Jan," Barbie said, "how do you know anything about—me—about that?"

"Why, Mom hears, at the bridge parties."

"Oh, is that so! What does she hear?"

"Oh, people just criticize—you know how they would."

Barbie said, her chin thrust out: "Well, it makes me sick! Everyone dances with them at the club and drinks their liquor! It's their club in the first place, but all the Americans are damn glad to be invited to belong to it! But if any girl dances with them a little more than anybody else, then the talk starts! And all that snooty business about the officers dropping a girl if she has dates with the Panamanians is just simply because the officers know the Panamanians are a whole lot cuter, and better dancers! It's just jealousy, that's all!"

"Oh, the Panamanians haven't got any respect for women. All Latins are like that. You know that's so."

Barbie said after a little while: "Well, maybe some of them are like that, but not—not all of them."

"Well, you can't just pick out the nice ones to dance with."

"Well——"

Barbie said: "Juddy gets sore as the dickens. We come home and don't speak for days. But it's better not to speak at all than fight like hell, like we generally do."

She said then: "Oh, well, nobody gets along. Look at Tommy and Elsa."

"What about them?"

"Why, he's not in love with her, everybody knows that. But she is with him. Head over heels. That's what's too bad. You know what? He's still in love with you."

"Oh——"

"Yes, he is. And you know it damn well, too. Have you seen them since the transport?"

"Mom and I called on her. And then they called on us."

"She's so quiet. She just sits and either looks at him all the time or else looks around sort of scared at everyone else."

"She looked at me all the time. And whenever I'd look at her she'd smile the funniest smile."

"Poor kid. But she ought to have had better sense than to marry him. She knew he was crazy about you, didn't she?"

"I don't know."

"Well, she can always get a divorce. Say, are you going to?"

"Yes—some time."

"Golly, that's where you're lucky, not having any kids. I'd get one in a minute if it wasn't for Barbie Lou."

CARNIVAL. A whole frenzied drunken city in costume. Snowstorms of confetti; balconies, palms, and telephone wires dripping serpentine. The truck processions continuing in the daytime: bands and singing girls and singing, shouting drunken boys. And everywhere, day and night, brawling sailors, and barroom doors whanging open, letting gusts of brassy music blare out into the pandemonium of the narrow streets.

She thought, looking at the striving noisy jam on the pavilion floor and the perspired costumes of the men, and the strained greasy overpainted faces of the women and everywhere grimacing drunken faces: I wish I hadn't come. This could make you go crazy too.

The music struggled against the horns and noise-makers. Tommy in a pirate's costume across the table said, shouting above a noise-maker behind his ear: "Let's dance, Jannie!" and she shook her head.

"I've been telling everybody I wouldn't. It's too hot and crowded."

"I know, it's fierce."

Everyone was dancing except Juddy in his sheik costume sitting alone at the other end of the table, scowling, very drunk. Everyone was drunk. Barbie was dancing with her Panamanian again: she was dancing almost entirely with Panamanians, it seemed, but with one tall one more than the rest.

Mom in a Spanish shawl, going by dancing with the Commanding General of the Department, waved and smiled. Elsa came out of the crowd and slipped down beside Tommy, nestling against him. She said: "Oh, it's awful in that crush. You can't move."

Waiters fought through the dancers. One came with fresh drinks. The music stopped, and the crowd pushed to the tables.

There was the sound of bottles and glasses again through the horn blasts and shrieks and the clanking din of the noise-makers, and in the occasional lulls the thwacking of the doors into the bar.

Tommy was getting drunk too. Elsa was unsteady, her hand on her glass shaking. She drank nervously, not happily. Juddy was drinking sullenly, ignoring the rest of the party. Barbie was very gay, her cheeks flushed, accentuating her paint.

Janet's dinner partner said: "Don't you think it's hot here?"

"Of course."

"Let's run off."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Go for a drive."

"Oh, no. We couldn't leave the party."

"Who'd notice in this mob? Mrs. Marley's about to pass out."

The music started again; a danza. Barbie's tall Panamanian bowed behind her chair.

The dinner partner said: "Shall we dance or finish our drinks—or go out?"

"Let's finish our drinks."

Dad going by in his Morro outfit, blowing a horn in Elsa's ear. An aviator's wife and a Panamanian were dancing on the piano top. There were many aviators and their wives present, all drunk. She kept being afraid of seeing Steve, but he didn't seem to have come.

A waiter brought more drinks, taking away glasses full of sodden confetti. Tommy and Elsa left to dance.

The young officer from Camp Gailliard, the dinner partner, said: "Let me congratulate you on the way you hold your liquor."

"I just don't seem to feel it. I never drank cocktails before—I'm used to it straight."

"Fine! We'll get it that way."

"Oh, no, I'd rather have it this way. I don't want to get tight anyhow."

"Don't want to get tight—during Carnival?"

The Panamanians on the floor were singing now. Something about *los Carnavales*. That was the song the boys and girls sang most in the trucks. A group in a corner pushed the mob back,

circling for the tamborita, clapping hands and stamping. The Queen went into the center.

The young officer said: "Your friend Barbie is going native with a vengeance."

She said: "Sh-h-h!" glancing at Juddy.

"He can't hear, he's too far gone."

Juddy's eyes, strained out to the floor, always searching, were bloodshot, the corners of his mouth white and drawn down.

At the far end of the pavilion a couple fell backwards across a table, spilling several glasses over the cloth. She saw then that the colored lights around the fountain were whirling very fast.

Three o'clock, and tired drunken people getting into cars and speeding over confetti-heaped streets to the cabarets and bars to finish the morning. Sailors in soiled uniforms on the sidewalks still, garlanded with serpentine, sick at the curbs.

Donohue's. Sweating bodies jammed on a tiny floor, shuffling to the music of a black orchestra. Costumes soaked through and sour-smelling; cheap dyes running under bare armpits; rouge standing out like fever on pale greasy cheeks.

Doors to the bar whacking and whacking. Waiters and trays. Waiters and trays, streaking and swooping. Bottles and glasses clinking, and liquor upsetting. Tables whirling. Tables and glasses and faces whirling and swirling.

"All alone—

By the telephone—

Wanting no . . . one—but—you . . ."

In the jam on the floor, fighting to breathe. Barbie in the jam too with her Panamanian, her forehead pressed up against his cheek. Juddy back at the whirling tables alone, slouched in his chair. Black orchestra singing:

"Won—d'ring—

Where you are—

And how you are—

And if you are—all alone—too. . . ."

Tables and waiters and faces and orchestra and the whole room whirling.

Outside in a taxi, lying back in unwanted arms crying. Being kissed over and over by unfamiliar lips that didn't pay any attention to tears; speeding into the harsh gray light of a breaking day.

§ 2

SHE awoke knowing that there was some reason that she ought to want to die. Remembering, she burrowed into her pillow, drawing her breath and holding it a long time; letting it out, moaning in a whisper: "Oh, *God*—God——"

"Janet."

"What?"

"Take the covers off your head. Look at me."

"No. The light's too bright."

"Well, listen to me, then. I suppose you have no memory of the *beautiful* condition you came home in this morning."

"Oh, don't start, please——"

"Don't start! No—I should never start! Just let you go right ahead your own sweet way and disgrace us all again just as you used to at Jonathan Wayde! Who saw you in the condition you were in? Where had you come from? Donohue's?"

"Oh—we went driving."

"*Driving*? At five A. M.! What a lovely, *intelligent* thing to do! Of course people saw you coming home and knew you'd been out all night! What do you suppose they'll be saying to-day?"

"Oh, some of the others didn't get in till just as late. We passed a bunch from Amador just getting in, on our way back. Barbie was with them."

"Well, Barbie's no model of virtue! Where did you go?"

"Oh, we just drove. And parked at Bella Vista a while——"

"Parked at Bella Vista! In a public taxi—in broad daylight! Haven't you the sense you were born with? What do you suppose people thought who saw you there? What do you think Sandy Holbrook thinks of you himself——"

"Oh, I don't care! Please let me alone."

"I was so proud of you at the Club—you looked so pretty and everyone was so complimentary to you! I thought how nice

it was—what a comfort—to have a really grown-up *sensible* daughter for a change! Your father was so proud of you—poor man, what will he think——”

“Well, you don’t have to tell him!”

“He heard you! As if anyone could help hearing you, the way you acted! The servants heard you too, and they’ll talk——”

She prayed into her pillow: Oh, God, make this moment get over with. You couldn’t make me any more ashamed than I am.

“I suppose you’re going to start now all over again, just as at Jonathan Wayde—I suppose we can just brace ourselves——”

“I’m not! I’m not! I didn’t mean to get tight at all! I didn’t want to go in the first place—it was you that wanted me to go.”

“I didn’t know you were going to disgrace yourself! I thought you were old enough now to have some sense of propriety and decency—some self-respect——”

“I won’t go to-night, just to show you! I’ll call up and say I can’t come.”

“You know perfectly well you can’t disappoint Mrs. Pollock when she’s invited you and planned on you and when every other girl she might get is certainly dated up for to-night!”

She sobbed: “But I don’t want to go! I hate it all so! I don’t want to get tight—I just want some kind of peace—that was all I wanted, and you wouldn’t let me alone—you kept at me till I got convinced maybe going out *was* what I needed, but I know now it wasn’t, it’s just made me feel worse, and now you won’t let me stop either, so I’m not to blame if the same thing happens again!”

“But, for the Lord’s sake, haven’t you any will power—any character—any self-respect?”

She shook her head, sobbing into the pillow.

Mom said: “No! I suppose not. The Lord knows, I don’t know how your father and I ever produced such a poor little weakling. Heaven knows *we’re* not——”

She put her hands over her ears under the covers. When she took them away the room was still.

§ 3

SHE felt weak and sick from her lingering hangover, but in her loneliness and desolation, looking at the same mad crowds and the same whirling colors and listening to the same drunken sounds, she thought, with a flash of the clearest vision she had ever known: It symbolizes all my life—to-night. Because this is what all my life will be: a repetition of all the old unhappinesses and shames and everything that I dread and hate and try to get away from and can't escape.

She thought then: But I needn't have come to-night. I didn't have to let Mom make me come—I could have stayed home.

But you did come. You're here. And that's how it'll always be: there'll always be something a little stronger than you, like Mom to-night.

But why will there? I used to be so strong! I used to be stronger than anybody! What's become of me?

Well, something has, because you're not strong any more. You're just nothing. You're all done—through.

She heard Tommy across the table say, "Jannie!" and realized that her head had bowed very low and that tears were dripping into her glass.

She sat up, brushing at her eyes, and took a drink. A green streamer zipping from the balcony hung around her neck.

Everyone was gone from the table, out in the crush, dancing. Except Tommy opposite her, and Juddy in a clown costume at the far end again, scowling at his glass.

She murmured to Tommy: "I'm sorry——"

"What's the matter, Jannie?"

"Oh, I just feel—punk."

"So do I. I didn't want to come."

"Neither did I."

"Well, why did we?"

"I don't know."

Elsa's big eyes looking out of the crowd. She came in a moment, a little pierrette in black and white, and dropped down beside Tommy, her arm thrown over his shoulders, her small tired painted face pressed under his chin.

He said: "Sit up—you're a big girl now."

"You dance with me," she begged.

"Not me. Not in that mob."

After a while she went into the crush again. An officer came over from another table. Janet said, "I'm sorry, I'm not dancing," and he went back.

"Why don't you dance, Jannie?"

"Oh, you know it's no fun when it's such a jam."

"I'd like to dance with you again—just once."

"We couldn't. I've been telling everybody I wouldn't, and you told Elsa——"

"Oh, well, I guess it's best anyhow."

Elsa going by again, her fingers touching Tommy's tawny hair.

Janet asked: "Is—is Elsa the same girl you were engaged to at Jonathan Wayde?"

"Uh-huh. Why?"

"I just wondered. You didn't get married till so long afterwards."

When he didn't answer, she said: "She's so sweet—and awfully pretty."

"Don't you think she looks like you?"

"Why—I don't know."

The music stopped and the people came back to the table, swinging noise-makers and blowing horns. New drinks were ordered.

Barbie panted, her arm around Janet's neck: "Aren't you having a marvelous time?"

"Not specially."

"Oh, well, you're just a cuckoo! My God, I'm going nuts for glee!"

She whispered, squeezing Janet's neck: "Look at Juddy! He can't hold his liquor like a gentleman—he's being rude to his hostess! He ought to be spanked and sent home!"

She asked then: "Did you know he'd never touched a drop till he met me?"

"No."

"Well, he hadn't. I started him, just like Dickie did you."

Barbie whispered then: "Darling! Don't tell! Cross your

heart! *I'm in love!* And how! Oh, baby, he's wonderful! I'm crazy about him! I'm thrilled all over from head to toe!"

"Barbie!"

"Oh, gran'ma, shut up! Thank God, I'm not like you! We're going for a ride after a while—after Juddy gets a little tighter. C'm'on and go along—Paquito'll get one of the other boys!"

"No! And you'd better not go either!"

Someone was calling Barbie to come and get her drink. She went back to her own place.

Over the pavilion railing, leaning black palm clusters were silhouetted against the beach curving away to Old Panama, sparkling white under the full moon.

The horns and noise-makers were gone from the table, out in the crush again.

She said to Tommy: "The moon's so much bigger here than in the States. Do you notice?"

"Don't talk about the moon."

The beauty of the recurrent native music made her want to cry again.

She said, looking out at the beach: "I'd like to be out there instead."

"Let's go."

"Don't be dumb."

He was getting drunk now; his face flushed.

She told him: "It seems so queer to see you—drink."

"Well, I don't like to see you, either."

"But I always have—for a long time."

"So have I."

"You haven't."

"Ever since I saw you last time at Jonathan Wayde."

"Oh. . . ."

She asked him then: "But why do you—still?"

"Why do you?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"Oh, because I'm—not happy, I suppose."

"Neither am I."

He asked her after a little silence: "You didn't leave him that time, after all, did you?"

She shook her head.

"Why did you go back, Jannie?"

She shook her head again, looking at the beach.

"Well, have you left him now—for sure?"

"Oh, don't—I can't——"

"Sorry."

"Oh, God," he said then, "what's the point of anything? What's the good of trying to be happy?"

"You can't be happy married, anyway."

"Maybe we would have been."

"No."

"But I wouldn't have fought with you like he did, Jannie."

"Don't talk about him."

The party was coming back. The waiter took orders for fresh drinks. Elsa came, smiling at Janet with her nervous lips. Janet turned her face away.

She knew that she was in a car, driving fast, for there were lights going by at regular intervals like a parade of comets' tails. Her gypsy kerchief was lost, and she was glad for the strong night breeze that blew her curls in her face.

After a while the car stopped, and she stared out, blinking at water on both sides and a nest of bright lights far away.

"Where're we?"

"On the causeway. Isn't the night beautiful from here?"

She knew, after a little while, through her drunkenness, that the night was too beautiful for the ugliness of kissing someone she had known only a few hours.

"What's the trouble, sugar?"

"Take me back!"

"Don't be a little fool!"

"I want to go back!"

"You can't have everything you want in this world."

She cried then, fighting his kisses; wanting to die in the water below.

"Well, God damn it, we'll go back!" he said.

She cried all the way through Amador and the town, huddled by the roadster's door.

"You want to go home?"

"No, no—back to club!"

"You're too drunk to go back."

"No, no, no—back to club!"

The club rearing again; the bright lights of its entrance.

Crowd pushing in the hallway; Tommy in the middle of it, and she was gasping to him: "You take me away! You take me away!"

The crowd bumping. Someone seizing her free arm, pulling.

"Jan! We're going driving now—you and Tommy come on. . . ."

Four in the rear of an open taxi then, speeding over a narrow confetti-strewn street.

She sobbed, in his arms: "Oh, don't make me go back! Don't make me go back!"

"Good God, Jannie——"

"I came back to you! I just wanted you! I don't want to go back to that—oh, don't let me go back to that!"

"Jannie! Good God, stop!"

"Oh, you're so clean and decent and I'm so rotten!"

"I'm not, Jannie, but you're not rotten either!"

She babbled, clinging to him: "Oh, let me stay with you! Don't make me go away again! I was going crazy, so I went out and drank, and now it all happens just like before, and I can't go back to that—I'd rather die first—oh, don't make me go back to that!"

He whispered: "Jannie——" his head dropped back against the seat top.

Outside the town the music of the roadside cantinas blared and died. The two in the other corner were silent, making a single shadow past the flaring lights. The car sped on.

§ 4

SHE lay in the swing in the dark, grateful for comparative rest after the familiar ordeal of the day, listening to the beating of

wings in the palmettos and the cries of the little wakeful owls and the low valedictory whistle of ships below on the Canal.

Someone was coming around the house, walking in the grass. She sat up, staring toward the front steps.

He came up them, tiptoeing, opening the screen door to the porch.

"Who is it?"

"Jannie—hello. It's me."

He came down the porch in a makeshift costume of white trousers and shirt open at the throat, a Morro sash around his waist.

She felt chill in the breeze blowing through the screening. He stood beside the swing.

"Jannie, I had to come."

"You're tight!"

"I know it—a little, not very—I've been drinking to try and forget about last night."

He asked her then: "Why didn't you come, Jannie? It's the last night."

"I didn't want to. I didn't want to the other nights—I wish I hadn't! Then I wouldn't be feeling so cheap now!"

"Jannie, you don't feel cheap—on account of me—do you?"

"Oh, no, no—I wouldn't ever on account of you—just on account of Elsa, so far as you're concerned. Gosh, what must she think of me to-day?"

"But she never knew, Jannie, where I was! I told her I went outside because I was sick!"

"Mom said she knew! Mom was coming down the stairs and said Elsa was right behind you, about to speak to you when we left!"

"Oh, good God! But she never said anything to me. If she'd seen, she would have, sure."

"Oh, no, she might not. She's so decent—so damn sweet and square."

She got up and went past him to the screening and leaned on it, her head on her arms. He dropped down in the swing.

"God—the same old swing, Jannie."

She told him: "Oh, you've got to go. You're just making me feel more rotten still. I was so tight last night—I didn't know

what I was doing—I only knew you were a—a haven after the others, and I forgot things were so—so different now. I'm not used to thinking of you married."

"Oh, God, Jannie, I wish I wasn't!"

"But you are, and we've both got to remember it. And that's all. So now—you've got to go."

He cried: "No, Jannie, for God's sake, don't make me! I won't even touch you, but just let me stay a little while!"

She asked after a moment: "Are Mom and Dad still at the club?"

"Yes."

"Elsa'll miss you——"

"No, she won't. I left to take Shorty Long to Amador—he was passing out. She thinks I'm staying to put him to bed."

"Didn't you have to?"

"No, he got all right in the taxi. He went on by himself, and I came up here."

He told her then: "Barbie's gone again with Paquito."

"Oh, no!"

"Uh-huh. They'd been gone an hour when I left."

"Was Juddy tight?"

"Sure—just the same as always."

She came back then, dropping down beside him, her hair falling over her hands.

"There's too much unhappiness in the world—among decent people. I don't want to help make any more. Elsa—I like her so."

"She likes you. She's always known."

"Known that you—loved me?"

"Sure. I told her when I first knew her. But she'd have known anyway—besides that."

"How?"

"I called her Jannie—on our honeymoon night."

"Oh. . . ."

"She never has forgotten. But she never says anything—didn't then. I knew she cried, though—after she thought I was asleep."

She got up, catching her breath, then turned and said: "Oh, get out. Please—you've got to go. Go on—go on, you've got to."

"I will, Jannie, in a minute! Just let me stay a minute more and I promise I'll go then."

"But even being here a minute isn't playing square when—when you're hers."

"I'm not hers, Jannie! Oh, good God, I've never been hers a minute—I've never been anyone's but yours! I never loved anybody like I did you that Christmas—like I do you still!"

"Oh, don't talk like that!"

"But you know it's true!"

He caught her arms; pulled her down to the swing. "Jannie, kiss me—*please!* You wouldn't last night!"

"No, no, no!"

"Yes! Just once, Jannie, please, please! Then I'll go!"

The faint scent of him that was all his own, forgotten a long time, struck her with poignant familiarity.

She knew, with her strange new wisdom, that what hurt so sharply in his kiss was only the memory that at the time she had first known his kisses there had been as yet no knowledge of pain.

She tore away, trembling, trying to push him from her, but hiding her face instead tightly against his bared throat.

She couldn't have left him then, for he held her crushed so close that she couldn't have moved, breathing in shuddering sighs into her hair.

After a long while she whispered: "Lie down—hold me just a minute—like we used to do."

She put the pillows at one end, and they swung their legs up and lay still, her face on his breast.

She said aloud then, crying all at once, bitterly: "Oh, God, forgive me for taking this little bit of peace!"

After a while she stirred and he caught her closer, desperately.

"No, Jannie! Don't!"

She said gently: "Yes. Let me up now."

"Oh, please, Jannie, no!"

"Yes."

She put her hands on his breast and sat up. She took his wrists then, and held them above his head on the pillows, and leaned once more and kissed his throat where his shirt fell open, and sat up again, moving away.

He put his arms over his eyes and lay shivering. She climbed over his legs and stood beside the swing, holding out her hands.

"Come on."

"No, Jannie——"

"Yes."

"Oh, please—just a minute more——"

"No. Come on—now. You've got to. Mom and Dad'll be coming home."

He got up, staggering a little.

"You're tight still."

"I'm not, Jannie—I'm just weak. Oh, God——"

She led him to the porch door. "Remember, don't come back—ever. Remember?"

She saw his pale drawn face in the moonlight coming over the Canal.

He caught her in his arms again and kissed her, sobbing against her lips. Then he went down the steps, walking quickly, away on the grass.

She went back to the swing slowly, her hand to her hurt lips; dropping on the floor, leaning into her arms, feeling an aloneness more terrifying than any before, unable to cry.

THE streamers that caught on the ponies' hoofs and the dirty confetti in the gutters were swept away. Only the painted telephone poles in the plazas remained, and the serpentine in the wires and balconies that the breeze hadn't been able to blow down, straggler ghosts of the delirium that had given way overnight to the sobriety of the Lenten season.

The fleet, lying out beyond the fortified islands, had vanished too; stolen away in the night or early morning. The streets with the sailors gone seemed desolate, the barrooms mere faded blue and green fronts again, their brassy blares stilled.

On the porch of the Army and Navy Club, Barbie said over her straws: "You're worse than ever, even if you will drink now. I give you up."

She asked then: "Why don't you have dates some more? I know it isn't because nobody asks you."

"I don't want dates."

"Holy Moses! What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Whew! You're too much for me."

"I might——"

"Well, what?"

"Go back."

"To *Dickie*?"

"No, no—to New York."

"No kidding?" Leaning across the table, Barbie asked then: "Say, what could I do in New York, Jan?"

"Why—I don't know. You might model—maybe you're tall enough. But what could you do with Barbie Lou?"

"Oh, hell, you would think of that. Oh, well, I wouldn't leave Panama right now, anyway. Try and tear me away."

Barbie was restless. After a little while she said lightly: "I'm sick of this joint. Let's amble down to the Panama Club." She asked then: "What's the matter?"

"I know why you want to go there. You better stay away."

"Oh, don't be a grandma."

Barbie said then defiantly: "You think that was just a Carnival flirtation. Well, it wasn't. I'm crazy about him. Laugh that off."

"Then it's all the worse, and now's the time to quit."

"Quit, hell! I'd be wild if I couldn't see him again. He feels the same way."

Barbie said: "Oh, Jan, you know you've got to have somebody, when you're not happy with who you've got. Damn it, that was what I set out to find. I did want a gay time, but I wanted to find somebody too. Now I've found him. I hate Juddy, and I love Paquito, and nobody's going to take him away!"

"But—gosh——"

"Oh, I won't be an unfaithful wife—I'm still decent, I hope. I've still got some of the principles I was brought up with."

She frowned at Janet's drooped head. "You'd be a damn sight better off if you'd find someone. Why don't you take Tommy? He's so much in love with you."

She went on: "Oh, on account of Elsa, I suppose. Well, it's her own lookout, since she was fool enough to marry him. Whether she knew about you or not, she ought to have been bright enough to see he wasn't in love with her. Tommy isn't the type to put over any kidding."

She told Janet then: "If it wasn't for Elsa being here, you'd take Tommy back and be damn happy with him again! He'd make you forget Dickie."

She demanded: "Are you going back to New York because you think you are falling for Tommy again?"

"Oh, I'm not going back—I just said maybe—I was thinking about it, but I couldn't—not yet."

The waiter was behind Barbie's chair.

Barbie asked: "Another punch?"

"All right."

§ 2

MOM said, leaving for the pier: "Well, the Koslows and your friends the Varkses are going to think it very strange indeed for

you not to have come to the boat, but if Pinky Collins calls up you'll certainly have to see him. Now—I don't want you to hurt his feelings, when he used to be so nice to you at Jonathan Wayde. He'll only have two hours on shore, and of course he'll want to get a drink, and you can just sacrifice yourself for one evening and show him around."

The pavilion was empty and still, the decorations down and the confetti all cleaned away. There was a group of Panamanians at a table under the balcony, but all the other tables were vacant, the break of the waves on the building's foot the only sound.

Pinky Collins said over their glasses: "Good glory, but you've changed, girl. What have you been doing to yourself to look so—so—so——"

"Oh, go ahead and say it—so much older."

"Well, you do, Jan, for a fact. I swear, it was a shock to see you."

After a while he asked her: "What do you hear from that husband of yours?"

"We don't write."

"You don't? Then it's official?"

"Yes—but how did you hear?"

"I didn't in so many words, but I had a hunch from the news Pop Kline brought up from Georgia."

Chilling, she asked: "What did he say?"

"Oh, nothing much except that old Dickie's hitting it up pretty lively. Said nobody down there's ever seen him sober."

She felt weak still when they took a taxi away from the club; spent, as though from some shattering physical strain endured through the whole day.

She didn't care when he put his arm around her; felt only the slight shock of reaction to unfamiliar lips when he kissed her. She thought: I'm not tight now, and it just doesn't matter. Why should anything matter—anything in the world?

They drove for an hour toward Old Panama, and back to the transport, and then she was riding by herself again up to the house on the hillside, feeling so ill in her loneliness that, getting

out, she stood a moment clinging to the hibiscus hedges, almost unable to walk alone.

The transport below on the Canal was still swinging out into the stream. Lying in the swing, she was watching its lights through the screening when she heard footfalls on the front steps.

She saw then that it was Tommy coming along the porch. He stood beside the swing in the dark and said: "Jannie—I just had to come back."

She said faintly, sitting up: "You said you wouldn't——"

"I know, but—Jannie, you don't know how it's been."

She was crying then, quietly, into her hands.

"What's the matter, Jannie? Oh, God, if I make you feel so bad I will go away."

"Oh, no, no—don't go!"

He sat down beside her and put his arm around her, smoothing back her hair. "Jannie, I couldn't help it. Jannie, I love you. I know, I ought not to, but I do."

"Never mind. I'm just—thankful for you to-night."

"What's the matter, Jannie? Did someone hurt you?"

"Oh, it's mostly—just me."

She told him then, leaning against his shoulder: "I'm so rotten. I'm just weak and cheap and—and all shot. I'm all gone to pieces. Nothing seems to matter or be worth while any more—I don't know what's going to become of me—I don't know what to do."

"You need somebody to take care of you, Jannie."

"I know it. I never used to—I never thought I ever would. But I know now I do."

"If I was free I would! Oh, God, I wish I'd been taking care of you all this time! If I was free now, would you let me take care of you for good?"

"I don't know."

She sat up straight, listening. "Sh-h. Mom and Dad are getting home."

"Oh, good God—will they come out?"

"Yes."

They came out, and Mom said: "Janny? Why, who's with you?"

"Its me, Mom."

"Tommy? Why, what are you doing here?"

He said, clearing his throat: "Elsa was coming over too, but she got a headache. So she said for me to go on."

"Oh. Well, don't stay long. People would certainly say things if they saw you leaving here late alone."

Dad said: "Good-night, kids," and he and Mom went upstairs, murmuring.

Tommy whispered: "Jannie—" putting his arm around her bowed shoulders again. She sat still, her hair falling over her hands.

"Jannie."

"Oh, why should we always have to be unfair to somebody else to be happy?"

"I don't know, but don't think about that now."

"Or not even happy—I don't care about being happy any more—I don't ever expect to be. But I do just want to be—at peace."

"So do I, Jannie. But I can't be, without you."

She sighed: "Lie down."

He held her tightly, her hair blowing about his face. "Oh, God, Jannie, this is the nearest to peace we'll ever have!"

"I know."

"Is it peace for you?"

"It seems so now."

He whispered, pleading: "Then see me some more, Jannie! Just this much again—every little while! I can't stand it if you don't!"

"But how—where? You can't come back here. Mom——"

"But when she goes to the movies! I can then!"

"But I can't call you to let you know."

"But I can walk by the movies, and if her car's there I'll know!"

"But Dad's bunk's right above here on the upstairs porch, and if he didn't go to sleep right away he'd hear. And anyway—Elsa—where could you tell her you went?"

"Oh, God, let's just don't think. Just let it work out—something'll help us."

"Maybe it won't."

He pleaded: "Kiss me, Jannie——"

He pushed her away at last and sat up, shivering, his head in his hands. "Oh, good God, Jannie, go away! Don't stay in Panama! I love you too damn much!"

She whimpered: "I can't! I would if I could—I will later, but not now—not yet——"

Mom was coming down the stairs in her kimono. "Tommy."
"What, Mom?"

"Now I think you'd better go home. You don't want people to be noticing and saying things. And besides, it isn't right to leave Elsa alone when she isn't feeling well."

"All right, Mom—I'm going."

"Well, now, right away. Good-night. Give Elsa my love."

"Good-night, Mom."

She went with him to the door a few minutes later.

He said brokenly, his face pale and drawn again in the moonlight: "When, Jannie? When can I come again?"

"Oh—any time—but be careful."

He kissed her once more; kissed her lips and her hair. Then he was gone, walking lightly away on the dried grass.

She knew Mom would call again. She climbed the stairs in unutterable weariness, and undressed and lay under her blowing sheet, knowing she would not sleep.

§ 3

THE flame trees, blooming the last of April, were small constant sunsets hovering over the parched lawns of the Zone towns.

At night the fireflies lay on the hillsides like legions of fragments of fallen stars.

She saw Elsa sometimes in the stores, answering her smile, passing on quickly; and once she stood beside her in line at the Ancon commissary, carrying with her for a week the memory of lovely eyes, suffering but never hostile. She was sure, turning from the vision of them everywhere: *She knows!*

Driving into the city through the outskirt street of little weathered barrooms and squalid cabarets, Barbie said: "Don't go to the Army and Navy. Stop at the Panama Club."

"Oh, you better not go there."

"Yes, I had. It isn't why you think—not the principal reason."

"Well, why, then?"

"Oh, we won't be so apt to see—people from the post, there."

"What's the matter—are people getting you?"

"A little—everybody knows now. And the way they look, I know they think I'm really being untrue."

Under the Panama Club balcony Barbie said: "People are getting on to you, too. At least they've got a pretty good idea what's what. Oh, we're both going to be in a nice jam before long."

"Well, stop, can't you, while the stopping's good?"

"Can you?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter about me—you said yourself it didn't when you've just got yourself. I don't care what happens to me—but I do for him—and Elsa—and Mom and Dad."

"Then you'd better lay off for their sakes, at least."

"Oh, quit preaching to me. Do something about yourself."

"I don't want to—I don't care. But damn it, I don't like to feel I'm leading you."

"You're not any more than I am you. Neither of us is much of an influence for the good."

"All right, I'll quit playing alibi for you, then."

"Then I will for you too."

"Don't you dare!"

After a moment Janet said: "To-day's my birthday."

"It is? So you're a great big twenty-two-year-old girl!"

She said: "I'm going to meet him to-night. So be prepared."

"Check. And I'm seeing Paquito to-morrow night, so same to you."

She ran past his taxi, drawn under the trees in the roadhouse yard, and parked Mom's car behind the low building.

He called softly: "Farther. It shows from the road still."

She came back presently, walking quickly, and got in beside

him in the touring car, and the driver backed it out and turned away from the town.

They kissed, and he said: "Gosh, I thought something had happened."

"Oh, I thought she'd never let me have the car."

"Jannie! Is she catching on?"

"Oh, she knows it's fishy, seeing Barbie so much, and even if I am, she doesn't like me drinking with her all the time either—she always knows whenever I've had a drink."

"God, I wish we didn't, but I've got to."

"I know—so've I now."

She said: "You've had some already."

"I had to, Jannie—I got so damn nervous waiting for you. We'll stop at the next place, and you can catch up."

Coming away from Old Panama at midnight, they were a little drunk.

She said: "Gosh, it doesn't seem possible a year's gone since——"

"To-day's your birthday, Jannie! I forgot!"

He groaned then: "I wish it was a year ago now."

"I don't. I'm glad it's over! But nothing's ever over. I don't think even when you're dead!"

"Oh, don't, Jannie. Oh, good God, if it was only three years ago, still, and you were still waiting for me!"

She got out at the cantina nearest the town, and he drove on, looking back. She backed Mom's car out and drove home slowly, sobbing on her arms on the wheel.

§ 4

FANNED by the lingering feeble breezes of the spent dry season, at sunset the day after that, she watched a battleship come in from the sea.

Coming up the stairs later, she heard Mom crying in her room. She stood at the stairs' top, and Dad came out of Mom's room. He started when he saw her, then turned his face with its shocked unspeakable grief away from her and went out to his bunk on the porch.

She whispered: "Dad——" after him, but he was gone.

She meant to follow him, but went instead where the crying came from and stood in the doorway, looking in at Mom lying on her bed.

"Mom—what's the matter?"

Mom started crying harder, turning away toward the porch.

"Oh, Mom—please——"

Crying horribly, Mom said: "You—you—how can you come home pretending to be so innocent when you know what you've done to—break your mother's and father's hearts——"

"Oh, Mom, I don't know what you mean!"

"Don't know what I mean—how can you lie so! I suppose you *haven't* been sinful with Tommy—throwing your virtue to the winds and trampling on the faith and trust of your poor mother and father who've loved you since you were a baby, and breaking up poor Elsa's home!"

She stood catching her breath, almost fainting. She cried then, sobbing: "I didn't! I didn't! I have seen him—I've gone out with him and met him places, but that's all, and you've got no right to accuse me just like you always do, with no grounds at all——"

"No grounds at all! What was my car doing in back of a roadhouse that rents rooms by the night?"

She pitched forward, catching the bedstead and crumpling on the bed at Mom's feet.

She half screamed: "We left it there while we drove in a taxi! We left it because people would recognize us in it, driving together! You can go out and ask the people that run the place if we didn't park it and go away and come back later! But I'll swear right now on the Bible or anything you want, because it's the truth!"

She saw then that Dad was standing behind her in the hall door. He put his arm around her tightly and led her away with him out to the porch, and they sat on his bunk, side by side.

"We're sorry, Chick. Guess we kinda jumped at conclusions."

"Oh, that's all right, Dad."

"But it did look bad—behind that kind of a place. And it's all over the heights and Amador now—it's bound to get all over the Zone—afraid the General'll hear."

She asked, sniffing: "How did you know?"

"Somebody saw the car—don't know who it was, but somebody—one of the ladies at the bridge party at Amador this afternoon—told Mom—thought Mom ought to know."

She shuddered, dropping her face in her hands.

He said: "We'd kinda had a feeling all along something was going on that shouldn't—kinda had a hunch you were seeing him."

"I was seeing him—I had to put that much over on you—I hated to——"

"Couldn't you have seen somebody else instead?"

"Oh, I just seemed to want Tommy—I can't explain how I feel."

"I know, but hadn't you better be picking out some fellow that isn't tied up?"

"Oh, I don't want to get married again—I told you that. I just want—even a little bit of—peace."

"After a while," she told him, "I'll go away—back to New York. I'm not going to sponge on you and Mom forever. But I can't go yet—I can't explain that either."

She started crying again, remembering, hunched over her knees.

"Never mind, Chick."

"Oh, I *am* rotten!"

"Mom and I don't want you to go away. We want you to stay on with us right along if you want to. But—" a shaken sigh—"this sort of thing——"

"Oh, I know—I know!"

"Think you can cut it out, then?"

She told him, sobbing wildly: "No, Dad, I can't! Don't ask me to! Oh, you don't know how I feel—he's all I've got now! It isn't wrong just to see each other like we do, and if I didn't have him any more now I'd go crazy! Oh, I know I'm just rotten and weak and no-account, but I've fought against everything till I can't fight by myself any more, and—and oh, God, you don't know how it is to be alone!"

He got up and stood at the screening, looking down at the red roofs and the palmetto leaves slapping. She sat on his bunk, sobbing, drooped over her knees.

IN APRIL the rains had begun again, and now in June the green was back that you felt at night in the dark as sharply as you saw it by day. Most of the mornings were still dazzlingly clear, but after lunch every day, as regularly as the coming on of the stars in the evening, the deluges came, continuing in floods and lulls through the afternoon to settle down at night to an almost steady drumming monotone against the spread fans of the palmettos and on the roofs, like the tireless bills of a host of pecking birds.

Barbie was changing. Her face was getting thinner still, and the old restlessness in her movements was more like nervousness now.

She said, on her porch: "Juddy's acting so damn queer. I don't know what's the matter with him. He gets up nights and just walks around in the dark. And when I ask him what's the matter he won't answer me. He won't talk to me at all any more. Night before last I woke up, and he was just sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at me through the dark."

"Gosh!"

"Oh, he won't try to murder me—he isn't that kind. But it gets on your nerves just the same to wake up and find somebody just staring at you in the dark."

Barbie said then: "I know he notices that we're not being invited places any more. I know that gripes him, and he knows it's on account of me."

"Aren't you?"

"Not for the last month. Not that I give a damn—I'd rather not go—I was starting to refuse things anyhow, after I got wise to how everybody felt. But, just the same, it gives you a funny feeling to know you're actually not being asked any more."

"They gave up asking me a long time ago."

"I know, that's where you're lucky—you don't see the dif-

ference now. Oh, you'd get it too. I bet they're sorry you're not going out, so they can't snub you too."

Juddy came up the steps. He grunted, "Hullo," glaring at them both, and went on into the house, clanking his saber onto a chair. In a little while his boots hit the floor.

"You better get out. I don't want him to be rude to you."

"I don't mind that, but I've got to go anyhow."

They walked together to the curb.

Barbie said: "He knows damn well I'm not with you all the times I say I am. That's why he's taking it out on you too." She said, leaning on the car door: "When I go in now he won't answer a thing I say. Even Barbie Lou's getting to notice now and says funny little things."

§ 2

THE drum of the night rains had begun when Dad came out on the porch.

He asked in a strained voice: "Waiting for him again to-night?"

"No."

He came over to the swing, kneading his fist in his palm.

"Sure?"

"Of course. I don't lie to you."

He said, sighing: "Well, Jan, I don't know—you've got to do something about this thing. Tommy's heading straight for Class B."

"What?"

"That's the way it looks. The older officers are criticizing him—he's seen around at the bars in the afternoons loaded to the gills. No young officer can get away long with that sort of thing. If it gets to the General's attention——"

She whispered: "Oh, I know—I've told him."

"Well, don't you think you'd better tell him to stay away and cut out the booze? That'd be the best way to show him you care about him—huh?"

He told her then, his voice shaken: "You can't go on with this, Jan. You can't do it. I know you're innocent, as the world judges innocence—Mom and I know it—but other people don't."

And it's what they say that can hurt everybody concerned, and there're too many concerned in this to let such a thing go on. Why, if such a thing gets to the General the way people paint it—and it's bound to——"

He couldn't finish. After a moment he walked away, blowing his nose, leaving her alone with the dark and the rain.

She heard him go out the back door, to his office, the screen door slamming softly, muffled by the pound of the rain. Her eyes throbbed with the heat, and she lay with her hands pressing them, trying hard to fall asleep; praying to be able to.

Lights on the back road swept over her face through the screening, and she heard a car stop.

Somebody in a white dress was running through the rain around the side of the house. She thought Barbie was with Paquito, and sat up, startled, afraid something had gone wrong.

She saw then that it wasn't Barbie, but Elsa, coming down the porch.

Elsa said: "Jan? Is that you? Hello!"

She answered, "Hello," feeling light and faint. Afterward she remembered praying desperately that she had succeeded in falling asleep and that it was a dream.

She said, "Sit down"; and Elsa sat in a chair near the swing, coughing softly into her handkerchief, dabbing the rain from her cheeks, her face hidden in the shadows thrown in the moonlight by the bougainvillea climbing the screening, and the palms.

The rain beat louder. After a moment Elsa said, laughing nervously: "Jan, this is too silly—the wronged wife——"

Janet said, bowing her head and wanting to cry: "I'm sorry, Elsa."

Elsa said quickly: "Oh, it's all right. I'm not blaming you—I don't feel that way about it. You—I know you wouldn't ever understand the way I do feel——"

A mango fell with a thud on the swollen earth, and Elsa started. She went on then, twisting her handkerchief in both her hands: "I don't hate you, Jan. I never have. Maybe you think I ought to—I don't know how you feel about me. Maybe you hate me."

She shook her bowed head violently in the dark. "No, no——"

Elsa said in her low nervous voice, coughing every little while: "I—I've respected you, Jan. Really—from the first I knew about you. Because I knew you must be a—a wonderful girl to—for Tommy to have loved you so much. You see, he told me all about you—about losing you—the first time we met. It was all he could talk about. And I—I was so sorry for him. I think—I think maybe I did hate you just a little bit then—just for that—for what you did to him—hurting him so. But afterwards, the more he talked about you, and told about your riding so wonderfully, and your swimming, and—and just being such a good sport—and then later about your going to New York all alone to study art, and being so independent and game—why, I admired you so, Jan, and felt so—so inferior. And when he asked me to marry him I just couldn't believe it, but I knew by then I loved him—so awfully much, and—and I wanted to help him stop drinking so and be given a chance to *try* to make it up to him, because I had the idea that since I did love him so much, maybe—maybe——" Her voice broke.

For a moment she was still; then she lifted her head. "I knew he didn't want to marry me yet—on account of you. And even though I did love him as much as I did and wanted him for mine so, I wanted him to wait until it wouldn't hurt him so much to—to have somebody else besides you. I understood that. But still, all the time during all that long time we waited, I couldn't help feeling maybe I could make it up to him a little bit and help him forget faster if I only were given the chance. I knew I never could be—you to him—but, just the same, I did love him so, and after we were married I did try so hard——"

She jerked her head up again. "I don't know how it would have been if we hadn't been ordered down here. It might have been different—I don't know. When we got our orders, right after we were married, I—he said your family was down here, and I'd like them, and I was glad, and I just never thought about you being here at all. And then when we got here and—and he said it was you on the pier—I just thought, 'Oh, well, it's *God*—and if He's done this because He wants Tommy to be happy and knows he can't be with anyone but Jan, then I'll try not to

care. I'll just go back home.' Truly, Jan, that's the way I felt that day on the pier! And that's how I've kept on trying to make myself feel since. But now—I'm not so brave any more. It's different now—it isn't just me. Oh, Jan, this is the silliest of all—the tritest! I'm going to have a baby . . ."

They both sat a long while listening to the rain.

Then Elsa said: "It's almost three months along. So that's why I came to ask you—to beg you—to see it my way—the way I have to see it now. I don't want my baby not to have any father! I want it to have a lovely home like other babies, and be happy like all the little children I see playing around out at Amador! Besides, you don't know how you feel when you're like this. You feel so scared and alone, and you want your husband more than anything in the world." She gave a shuddering sigh. "I can't stand this any more! If it's got to go on like this, then I'll just have to give up and go back to the States, and I don't want to! Don't make me go away, Jan! I don't want to go away from him! And if you *would* tell him yourself not to see you any more, and then I told him about this, maybe—oh, he might be glad, and it might make him love me." She pleaded through the dark: "Oh, Jan, I *bate* this, and if I thought you really loved him I'd never have come—I'd just have gone back to my people and let anything happen that—that would. But you did marry someone else—you *could* have had him once, and you threw him away——"

Janet gasped: "Oh, I know—I know——"

"Then will you, Jan? You do understand how I feel?"

"Yes, yes—oh, Elsa, I'm so sorry—I'm so ashamed!"

"Oh, that's all right, honey," Elsa said. "I swear I've never blamed you. Or him either—it's just been God." She said with sudden bitterness: "It's just been His idea of fun."

"Don't talk like that."

"But haven't you thought yourself sometimes it's true?"

"I don't know."

Elsa said: "Since I've been in the army I've seen life as though everybody in the world were soldiers—marching on a big parade ground—marching by to amuse God, the Visiting General, when He says, 'Pass in Review.'"

Janet stood up, pushing back her hair. "Where is he now?"

"Tommy? Home—at least, he was when I left. But maybe he's at the club now."

Janet said: "I'll call him. If he isn't home I'll call the club. And you listen, so you'll know I really do tell him to stay away."

Elsa said, crying into her crumpled handkerchief: "I don't want to! I couldn't stand to know by what you said that he—that he was begging you not to send him away!"

Janet told her, standing awkwardly beside her chair: "Then you go on away—or, I don't mean—I didn't mean—don't go—but I'll call later, then."

"No, I'm going—my taxi's waiting, and we're so broke since he's been drinking so. Oh, Jan——" She caught Janet's hand.

"Oh, never mind."

"You're so—so good!"

"I'm not, I'm rotten."

They went through the house, and Elsa said at the back door, brokenly: "I don't blame him for loving you. I—I hope you'll always be happy, Jan."

She ran into the rain, and her car took her away.

In the back hall Janet called the quarters at Amador and got no answer. She tried the Panama Club then, and a waiter brought him to the telephone.

She said: "Tommy? I've made up my mind to quit. Don't come around any more. Promise."

He was drunk, and sobbed: "No, Jannie! No, no!"

"Yes. I've made up my mind. If you come I won't see you. I'm going to promise Dad. Good-bye."

Back on the porch the persisting vision of Elsa in her white dress still sitting in the chair troubled her, and she went upstairs and got undressed. She felt numb and tired all at once, and the beat of the rain slowed her racing thoughts. By the time Dad came in from his office she was asleep.

§ 3

SHE awoke at noon fighting for breath in the weighting heat, feeling at once a chilling sense of panic, not remembering why she should. She remembered then, and the old loneliness settled

down in the room, oppressive as the unstirring air and the sodden feel of the delaying rains.

She took a shower, hearing Dad come up to his bathroom to wash. They met in the hall and went downstairs together to lunch.

They were all halfway through lunch when Dad said: "Oh, say! Got some news! Pretty near forgot all about it! Bunch of orders came in this morning—Dickie goes to the Philippines! Be through here on the August boat!"

She stole the car that night from under the mango tree and drove alone in the rain, madly, past the cantinas with their blaring tinny music and flaring lights.

There was a car in back, speeding too, its headlights flashing in her eyes in the windshield mirror. She drove faster to escape its glare.

Between the tower ghost and the roadhouse at Old Panama at the concrete's end she swung, starting back, slowing down to let the other car slip into the circle to swing around too.

It stopped instead in her path. She saw then who it was and tried to crowd by, but he jumped on her running board and his taxi whirled ahead into the circle and passed, speeding off.

He panted through a hole in the isinglass: "Jannie—you've got to take me home!"

She cried: "I haven't! You can go in the cantina and phone for another car!"

"But I don't want to, Jannie! I want to see you! Jannie, you've got to let me stay!"

He was drenched by the flooding rain. She choked: "Get in!"

She sent the car leaping ahead, and he fell into the tonneau and climbed over beside her.

"I was coming up to see you, and I saw you go down the hill, so I came after you."

She said, near to crying: "Why did you? You knew it was best the way I said!"

"I know it, Jannie, but—oh, good God, you don't know what's happened now!"

He told her, putting his hands over his face and pushing back his dripping hair: "Elsa's pregnant!"

She crouched upon the wheel, veering over the wet road.

"Don't drive so fast, Jannie! But what does it matter anyhow? But I don't want you to die!"

He said: "When she told me I went to my room and cried. I think for a minute she thought I was crying because I was glad. I wasn't—I was just wishing she was you!"

He told her then, half sobbing: "Just that once, Jannie—since Carnival! Just because I felt like such a damn cad and tried so hard to love *her*—you believe that, don't you?"

She said into her arms on the wheel, embarrassed: "Oh—I don't mind that."

"Oh, God, if I'd been able to see this—I don't *want* this kid, Jannie! Isn't there something they can do?"

She shook her head, bent over her circled arms.

"Don't go so fast, Jannie, please! Let's get a drink! I've got to have one!"

She shuddered: "I want one too."

The odor of the wet season was everywhere. They sat outside the roadhouse, ordering drinks in hurried succession, and after a while they were drunk.

She told him, the words rushing: "Dickie's coming through to the Philippines on the boat after next!"

"He *is*?"

She wailed: "Oh, don't let me go back! Don't let me go back!"

"Jannie! Do you want to?"

"No, no, no! But I'm so afraid I will!"

She said, crying on her arm on the wheel, spattered by the rain coming in the torn curtain: "I don't want to go back and make him miserable again and spoil his life for good! You can't be happy married! I want him to be happy! But maybe he is now—maybe he's found somebody else——"

"Oh, God, Jannie, no man can find anybody else after loving you!"

Cars went by, and he said: "Let's get away from this damn place—they'll be seeing the car again."

They drove away, quite drunk, and down a little dirt road off the main concrete she lay in his arms, numb at last against all pain and shame and bitterness and fear.

"You won't make me go away, Jannie, will you? We both need each other more than ever now!"

"I know——"

"Then please don't make me go, Jannie! If I didn't have you any more now, all there'd be left is liquor—just liquor to try and forget, and I never could!"

Wet sleepless animals rustled in the brush. The rain on the car roof was a legion of birds' bills, boring, boring.

§ 4

THE July transport from the East would be nearing the locks now.

"You better go slow through the town or you'll get pinched, sure!"

"We've got to get there!"

"Well, you won't get there if you get pinched!"

"Gosh, if I'd only known sooner I'd have gone across and had all morning with her on the other side and come through with her too."

"Why didn't your dad know sooner?"

"I don't know—he'd just seen the list when I called you."

On the macadam road, at last, to Pedro Miguel.

"She isn't even going to stop, is she?"

"The transport—no. Only while the locks fill."

Hurtling around jutting corners. Barbie clinging to the door.

"You sap! We'll never get there alive!"

"But there's her steam! She's in the last lock right now!"

"Golly, you're right."

"I wish I hadn't gone for you!"

"If you hadn't I'd have smashed your jaw. Besides, you know damn well why you did."

Past Miraflores, whizzing on through the bright hot noon.

The crowds up on the *St. Mibiel's* decks were waving down and shouting, and the people below followed along the lock side, calling up through their hands; old friends with faces grown older, flinging memories across the space widening again as the

transport glided on with her laboring donkey engines toward the invisible sea.

Apart from the rest Frances stood, peering anxiously down into the groups on the bank.

She saw them run up then, and shouted: "Jan! Barbie!"

They shouted back:

"Frances! Hello!"

"How are you, anyway? How's everything?"

Frances cried through her hands: "I thought you weren't coming! I'd given you both up!"

"Dad only saw the list an hour ago!"

"Jan almost broke our necks getting us here! How do you like the P. I.?"

"I like it—we were there before, you know—when Jan was there!"

Janet said: "Tell it 'hello' for me again!"

"Wish you were coming along, dear! Barbie, you too!"

Frances was being carried away from them, and they followed frantically, shouting still. The crowds on the deck surged sternward, waving, voices growing hoarse, and then they could no longer hear. And that was all. They stood on the lock bank, leaning together, impotent and shaken, waving to Frances's blue dress while the *St. Mibiel* passed out into the widening channel, headed for the sea.

People were turning away; cars out on the road were starting up, roaring off. Some people were chatting in groups on the lock side still.

They spoke to a few, and then went arm in arm back to Mom's car, trying to keep their eyes straight ahead.

Slumping into the car seat, Barbie looked sick.

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you *see*?"

"Well, gosh, I didn't know it made all that difference to you!"

"I guess I just never got snubbed by so many people at once before."

They started off in silence toward the town.

Up ahead, the first rain of the day was coming down the sunlit road like a marching army.

"Look at it come!"

"Oh, baby, we're going to get a ducking!"

It struck, crashing on the car top like a splintering tree: washing the windshield in floods.

"Get over! You're on the edge of the road—you'll dump us over the side!"

"I can't see!"

"Turn on the windshield jimmy!"

"It won't do any good in this——"

"Look out, for Pete's sake, you're on the edge again! Get on the left where you belong!"

"I can't see at all, I tell you! I can't drive!"

"Well, then, stop!"

They drew up against the bank, shrinking away from the leaking curtains.

"My God, it's coming in everywhere!"

"Come over closer, you're getting soaked."

They linked arms and sat huddled together in the middle of the seat, subdued by the violence of the impact.

"Golly, I never did see it like this."

"Don't our voices sound funny!"

"Feel it rock the car!"

After a moment Barbie asked: "How did you think she looked?"

"I don't know—older, maybe."

"Oh, well, everybody does."

Barbie said then: "I thought she looked—sort of drooping. Poor Frances—she's got her troubles too."

"Dutch is in Honolulu, you know."

"No! I didn't know that. Well, I'm glad!"

"I'm not. People that can't have each other shouldn't ever see each other at all." She cried with sudden bitter passion: "I wish I didn't have to see Dickie when he comes through!"

"Gosh, in a month he'll be here, too."

"I know it."

"I bet you go back with him, baby, that's what I bet."

Janet groaned: "I won't. How could I get transportation, anyway? I'd be sure not to on that account, if nothing else."

"You could follow on the next boat, and I bet you do. Anyway, no kidding—sometimes I think you ought to."

"Go *back*?"

"It'd keep you out of trouble, anyway."

She moaned: "Oh, you don't know anything about it."

"Well, I know damn well you're heading for something awful here."

"Well, how about yourself?"

Barbie shivered against Janet's shoulder. "My God, Jan, that was awful back there at the locks."

"Oh, don't you suppose I know?"

"We both thought we'd be bucked up, having each other along. I know that's why you came out for me, and God knows I'd never have made a public appearance without you along. But that's all wrong. It just hurts you more, ol' girl, to be seen with me."

"No more than it does you to be seen with me."

"Well, it doesn't do either of us any good, but things can't be much worse for me. I don't want you to get it any worse."

"I don't see how I could, but maybe we'd better not be seen together any more, for both of our sakes—for our families', anyhow."

"I know—that's what's beginning to get me now. Barbie Lou——"

"I won't come out for you any more. I won't even come to see you, so they won't see the car parked in front of the house."

"I guess that's best, kid." She rubbed her cheek against Janet's shoulder, crouching away from the spattering gusts. "Oh, hell—when'll I ever see you, then?"

"Can't you come up in a taxi some night—really come to see me when you say you're going to?"

"I guess so. But I won't say I'm going to see you. That's worn out by now. I'm not kidding him any more, anyway. What's the use? He knows damn well what it's all about."

"But—but you don't tell him you're——"

"No, but I just go. He never says anything or asks anything but he knows, all right. And he knows I know he knows. Oh, it won't last long, I don't suppose. He'll blow up some day, and pull the outraged husband act, and then it'll be open warfare, I

suppose. Unless I've come to my senses by then." She shuddered: "Oh, hell!"

"Oh, well, maybe sometime it'll all be blown over for both of us, and we'll look back and laugh at the folly of our youth."

Barbie shivered: "I don't think I'm ever going to laugh at it. I feel as if it never will be blown over—I feel all caught up in it, as if I'd never be able to get free."

"Well, then, do you wish now you were out of it? Are you getting tired of Paquito?"

"Oh—no, but—he's different. He isn't like he was at first any more—he's so damn fractious—I can't seem to manage him like I used to. He's got a line about—if I really loved him—oh, you know. And I don't even want that, Jan. I *don't*. All I want is for him to be the way he used to be—just romantic as the dickens and wonderful to neck and so different from anyone I'd ever known before. Oh, he used to be such a perfect gentleman even when we were tight as hell—he did have respect for women. But lately he's just like a wild man sometimes—I get scared of him, I can't help it. But he isn't always like that, and every time I go to meet him I always hope that *this* night he'll be the way I want him to be. I don't dare let him get too tight any more, because that's when he's the worst."

Janet said bitterly: "You might as well go ahead and be rotten anyhow. You get credit for it whether you are or not."

"I know, but I don't want to be. I haven't got any urge to be. I couldn't imagine really having any man but Juddy, no matter how crazy I was about him. Could you? Anybody but Dickie, I mean? I think any decent girl is like that. And specially when you've got a kid."

Barbie said then, looking sick again: "I thought of something the other day that just left me cold. Jan, do you think people talk before their kids? Would they? Because if the little brats started saying things before Barbie Lou I'd just die!"

"Oh, they wouldn't—anyway, how could she understand? She's such a baby."

"Yes, but she's a smart baby—you don't know how damn smart she is. And all they'd have to say would be, 'Your mamma's bad.' Oh, Jan, that'd kill me!"

"Oh—they wouldn't—people wouldn't——"

"Oh, the hell they wouldn't. Once they get it in their heads you're scarlet and not worth any consideration from respectable folks, they wouldn't care who heard. Golly, I've been having nightmares since I thought of that. I've been trying to keep Barbie Lou in the house, away from the other children, but she gets so lonesome and cries so, poor little kid."

The torrents were sweeping over. Cars were coming up the hill behind.

"I guess we can go on now."

"Sure, you can see now. Keep ahead of those cars, for Pete's sake."

They drove on.

WAKING, she remembered, through the misery of her hang-over, that it was August, and that she had drunk the night before because it was going to be August, and had kept on drinking because it had become August and in two weeks Dickie would be coming through.

She became aware of sounds and realized that Mom was crying somewhere and that Dad was pacing back and forth with long slow strides.

Self-loathing crushed her into her pillow, and she felt as though the last weak impulse to live were going out of her on a breath of consummate weariness at the inevitable repetition of all drearily familiar hated scenes.

She didn't want to hear what they were saying, but she lifted her head to listen, and it throbbed, and she fell back, groaning aloud.

Dad came in from Mom's room, rapping softly. He came over where he could see her face, and she looked up at him in sullen misery without moving her head.

He started to speak, and she wailed: "Oh, I've got such a hangover—I can't stand to talk now!"

He said with a hardness in his voice she had never heard before: "Have you any idea what time you got in this morning?"

"No."

"It was ten minutes after Reveille. Have any memory at all about getting in?"

She shook her head, grimacing at its throbbing.

He told her: "The General's striker saw you passed out on the back porch and rang the bell. I went out and carried you in."

She shuddered into her pillow. She saw then that Mom had come in, standing behind Dad.

"Of course, it's all over the barracks by now! I shouldn't think you could ever show your face to any soldier again!"

"Afraid it's got to the General himself, by now. Jan, I tell you—I tell you——"

Mom said: "Where did you spend the night? Where were you?"

"In a taxi! We just kept driving all night."

"In a taxi—driving all night—with taxi rates what they are after midnight, and Tommy with no more money than he has and a baby coming! I know he's an idiot, but no human being could be *that* insane!"

"Well, we did! We were so tight we just didn't think! And if you don't believe it you can go check up at every roadhouse and see if we were there! I wish you'd quit believing the things you do about us! You've got no right——"

"Well, how do I know—why should I suppose you any different from other modern girls? With Barbie, your cherished bosom friend, going the limit practically before everyone's eyes with a Panamanian——"

She screamed: "She isn't! She isn't! She just sees him like I do Tommy, and you've got no right to accuse her either——"

"Just sees him—hmph! With everyone at Amador talking about her coming in at all hours of the night and morning—the Panamanian girls who come to the bridge parties all say it's true, that all the Panamanians are talking too! You know everybody's saying the same thing about you, and Heaven knows why they *should* think you any different when you and Barbie are seen together constantly."

"We haven't been seen together for two weeks! We haven't seen each other at all since Frances's boat came through!"

Mom said: "I am ashamed to go out any more! It's an *ordeal* every time I go to a bridge party or your father and I attend a dinner, but if we didn't bear our shame with some pretense of pride, people *would* think we couldn't hold up our heads—though how they can possibly be deceived, I don't know, after my car being seen behind that vile place!"

Dad was ushering Mom out, into her own room; telling her in a low stern voice: "Go on. Beat it. Won't get anywhere like that."

He shut the door, and Mom's crying came through it. The springs of Mom's bed creaked heavily.

He came back, pacing slowly, hands behind him, and paced away again, and strode back, and turned again with his slow slippered tread.

He asked in a voice sounding suddenly tired: "Did you know about those officers' wives on the other side getting asked to go back to the States?"

"No!"

"Yep—four or five of 'em. They'd been cutting up pretty gay for a long time, it seems—causing a lot of scandal one way and another. The General got wind of it at last and asked all of 'em to go back to the States on the next boat. They left last week."

"Who?"

"Don't think you know any of 'em—all aviators' wives. Hold on—guess you do know little Mrs. Farmer——"

"Lucille Farmer! Why, what was *she* asked to go for? Why, she's the sweetest, most innocent little thing! Why, that's the——"

"I know, that's what everybody thought—guess they must have been wrong."

She cried: "Well, they weren't, and I don't believe she *was* asked to go! She was going—she's been going for a long time, because she was sick! She said at Carnival she was planning to go soon and had been putting it off for a long time because she hated it so—she's going to have an operation in the States! And now she does go, and just because she happens to leave on the same boat with the others and was seen on a few parties with them maybe, people jump at conclusions, as usual! Oh, it's all rotten—everybody's rotten!"

He sighed: "Yes, and all the more reason for keeping out of their reach—don't give 'em anything to talk about."

"Oh, they would anyhow—they'd make up something! Lucille didn't give them anything, and look what she gets!"

Mom had come back. She said: "And speaking of aviators, you might be interested to know that everybody's just *waiting* for Steve to crash. Everyone from the other side says he's just courting death, flying drunk every day—of course, he's hearing about you and Tommy and thinks just what everyone else does! If he falls his blood will certainly be on your head—I'd

certainly think it was enough to ruin men's careers without killing them too!"

Dad whispered: "Can you get out to the porch, Jan?"

She sat up in her pajamas, holding her hand on her head, and slid into her slippers and took a kimono from a chair. She staggered, and he steadied her arm, and they went out to his bunk. Mom's door slammed.

She fell across his bunk, moaning: "Oh, I never had a hang-over like this!"

Standing at the screening, he asked: "Is it worth it—for a few hours' kick?"

"Oh, I don't drink any more for the kick, Dad," she told him. "I don't think I've ever done that since those old times at Jonathan Wayde."

"Then——"

"Oh, just to forget! When you get to a certain point you stop thinking about things. I know it's a cheap and cowardly way to face things, but that's all I am any more. What's the use of kidding yourself?"

"What was it you couldn't face last night?"

She told him, sobbing without tears: "Dickie coming through!"

She pleaded then, turning her face up to him: "Couldn't I go away? Couldn't *we* go some place—just that day, while the transport's in? Take the car and drive into the interior or some place—couldn't we?"

"Afraid the roads are in pretty bad shape now for getting off the concrete. Anyhow, what'd old Dickie think if you weren't down to say 'hello'?"

"He'd understand! Anyway, even if he didn't, it's for his own sake!"

"What is it exactly—afraid it'll make him feel too bad to see you again? Or both of you—huh?"

She bowed her head in her hands, not answering.

"Think you're still pretty much in love with him—huh?"

She whispered: "Oh, I've never loved anybody else."

After a moment he asked: "Then don't you think maybe you better go back and try again?"

"No, no, no—that's what you don't understand."

"Well, I don't know, Jan," he said, sighing. "If you both love each other still, seems like you ought to be able to hit it off together some way if you both tried hard enough. There're plenty of married people that might have split up getting along still with a little effort here and there on the part of both. But whatever you do—you've got to cut out this Tommy business. And if you're not in love with him, seems like it hadn't ought to be hard to do. Now, I've been putting it up to you up to now—thought you were old enough and sensible enough to see yourself how serious the thing's getting when everybody's passing it around the way they are. But if you can't put a stop to it yourself, why, I'll have to have him up on the carpet and make it a matter of orders and end the thing once and for all."

She got up unsteadily and went back to her room, leaving him still looking down through the screening at the palmettos spread in glistening passivity under the day's first bursts of rain.

She lay for a time pretending to be asleep, in case Mom should come in. Presently she heard Dad go out the back door. She fell into a nervous sleep finally, roused every little while by her heart beating too violently and by the stifling heat that made her head pound.

When she fully awoke at last she knew that it was much later in the afternoon. Mom was napping still, the sound of her breathing coming around the porch.

She got up and went to the bathroom and bathed her throbbing head, shocked at the oldness of the strained white face in the close sunlit glass above the bowl. She took a shower and dressed and went downstairs quietly. She felt dizzy and ill still, but she got in the car and backed out, softly, speeding toward the city and through its borders and onto the Sabanas road beyond.

She drove to Old Panama in the rain; drove with the windshield open and the pelting drops breaking against her face.

Circling, she drove back and turned right, into the mud, and went out past the grass shacks. Naked native children were swimming in the swollen reddish river. She crossed the bridge and a little farther on found the mud ruts impassable and backed into the jungles, retracing her tracks.

A mangy yellow mongrel slinking beside a hut barked at the car, the sound ending in a queer-noted wail. She shivered, remembering a childhood belief that a dog's howling meant death. The rain coming through the windshield washed the perspiration from her forehead.

Back at the house on the hillside, when she got out under the mango tree she saw Dad coming down the road from his office, but she went on in without waiting, and climbed the stairs heavily, dragging herself up by the banister.

Mom was at the top. "Will you kindly tell me what was the idea of taking the car in all this rain? Janet, answer me—did you go to meet that boy again?"

"No, I didn't! I just felt awful and wanted some air."

"Well, now, I've told you not to take the car—I don't know why you can't pay any attention to my requests! I've told you I can't *afford* to have you burning up gas for no earthly purpose at all! The idea, anyway, of just driving and driving—I suppose you've gotten it all muddy again too—did you? Did you, Janet? Well, if you did you can just clean it yourself! I'm not going to have poor Connolly laboring over it every single hour that he's off duty."

Dad was coming up the stairs, walking quickly. Something in the sound of his steps made them both look at him.

"Say—" he said in a queer thick voice, looking from one to the other of them—"Frances Nolan's dead!"

"*What?*" Janet screamed.

"*Dead?*" Mom gasped.

"Drowned off the *St. Mihil* just out of Honolulu!"

Neither of them could speak. He told them: "Nobody seems to get just what happened—the radio came in just now. Seems it was late, after everybody was in their cabins, and a deckhand saw her go over. By the time they got her up she was past resuscitation. They buried her at sea."

She walked to her room, bumping into the door. She sat down on the edge of her bed and stared out at them standing in the hall.

"Guess it must not have looked like an accident—couldn't tell much from the radio, but that was the impression everyone up at headquarters seemed to get."

"Then of course there'll be a hideous scandal! If it looked like—— Heavens, how perfectly ghastly! Such things just don't happen in the army! What on earth do you suppose could ever have made her do such a thing? David! Isn't Dutch Heindrichs still in Hawaii?"

She got up and fell against the door into the hall, shutting it, and fell back upon her bed.

A drowned face streaked across with long floating amber-colored hair took vivid form in the dimming light of the room, its strange sweet eyes open.

She sobbed, whispering, turning away from it into her pillow: "Oh, even when she's dead, won't they let her alone?"

An unutterable desolate weariness settled with the sunset light into the shadows of the room.

Her mind was overtaxed with its griefs and worries, and she lay in the swing, confused by memories; confusing amber hair floating on a sea with fair hair blowing in the morning breeze coming down a bathroom air chute. She was sure, clearly, of two things: that the last of understanding was gone out of the world, and that she had not known loneliness before.

Mom and Dad ate dinner by themselves. After dinner Dad lingered in the doorway looking out at the rain, and then went away. Mom came out and sat on the swing's edge, touching Janet's hair.

"Poor baby. But don't grieve for Frances, darling. She's probably happier now."

"I know she is!"

"Well, then—don't suffer for her so. Of course, it was a dreadful, dreadful thing, but such affairs do so often end tragically. If Frances just hadn't——"

"She never was untrue with Dutch!"

"Sh-h-h! Mother isn't saying she was. Mother doesn't know that she was. But whether she was or not, she loved him when he wasn't her husband instead of forgetting about him and trying to make the best of things as they were."

"She did try to make the best of things, but she couldn't help loving him still!"

"Well, now, Mother isn't going to talk to you if you're just

going to quarrel. She came out to try to comfort you, and you take her head off."

After a few moments Mom said: "Come and go to the movies, dear. It's Harold Lloyd to-night. Wouldn't he help take your mind off unhappy things?"

"No."

"Mother thinks he might. Won't you try just a little while and see? We'll come home if——"

"No."

Mom said, sighing, stroking Janet's hair: "Mother's sorry she talked so to-day. But darling, you can't realize—you won't realize till you have a little girl of your own, what a mother does suffer, knowing her baby is doing things to make people say terrible things, and imperil her social position and her good name. Mother does dread people's cruel tongues so, and they can do *such* harm. If only you'd see in poor Frances's dreadful end, darling, the——"

"Oh, please go away—please leave me alone!"

"Well, Mother only wants you to see. Father does too. Father and Mother would both be so glad if you'd think very seriously about making up with Dickie when he comes through. We don't want to lose our only little chicken again, but we do want her to do what will be best for her and make for everybody's happiness. And Dickie has been a good, faithful husband, and he loves you so. And it *isn't* that Mother doesn't like Tommy, darling—it's because she is fond of him and wants him to be happy again too with his own sweet wife and his baby, and he will, once he knows he can't have you any more, and then he'll stop drinking too and be saved from being asked to resign—think how terrible you would feel if Tommy got Class B'ed on account of you."

"Oh, I know, Mom—please just let me alone—I'm too tired to listen—I just want to rest."

Mom stooped and kissed her in the dark. "Then Mother'll leave her so she can rest. But now, don't worry and grieve any more, dear. Try to brace up. Think about the long, long future ahead. Twenty-two's so young to be so awfully lonely and sad."

She lay alone again, believing that the weariness she felt must be something like death.

After half an hour she saw Tommy coming around the house in the rain and lay motionless, unrejoicing.

He tiptoed down the porch, whispering: "Hello, Jannie."

She said aloud, "Hello," and he asked: "Isn't your dad in?"

"No, he went to the office."

He relaxed, sitting beside her and leaning down to kiss her. "Your face is hot. Good God, we were tight last night, Jannie. Did you get in the house all right?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

"Awful."

"So do I. Can I lie down?"

"Oh, no—please—it's so hot."

He held her hand in both of his on his knee, staring into the dark. "Elsa's gone."

"What?"

"Uh-huh. On the *Santa Carla*. Her folks sent her the money."

She moaned, taking her hand away: "Oh, *why* did you let her go?"

"Gosh, Jannie, I couldn't help it—she wanted to go. She's been talking about it for the last month—planning on it. She wanted to be with her mother and have the kid in the States."

She gave a long shuddering sigh.

"Why, Jannie? What's the matter? Why shouldn't she go? Anyway, she went by herself—I never knew till this morning, when I found her letter. She went yesterday afternoon while I was at the club. I felt like hell not being around to help her get off. Here, you can read what she says."

He took a folded piece of paper from his pocket, reaching for the floor lamp.

"I don't want to!"

"But there's nothing in it—she wouldn't care——"

"No, no, no—I don't want to!"

"Well, all she says is good-bye and not to think she went off mad because she didn't wait to see me—she got the letter from her folks with the check and felt homesick and made up her mind to catch the *Santa Carla* if she could get a room, and she did. That's all."

She lay turned away from him.

After a while, to forget Elsa, she told him: "Frances is dead."

"Frances—*Nolan*?"

"Yes."

"No, Jannie! How?"

She told him about the radio.

"Oh, good God! What made her do it, anyway?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, good *God*!"

They stayed silent a long while. The stairs inside creaking startled them.

"It's your dad, Jannie! You said he was at the office!"

"I thought he was!"

He came out to the porch quietly, in his shirt and breeches, leggingless. Tommy sprang up.

Nobody spoke until Janet said: "I thought you went to the office."

"What made you think that?"

"I thought——"

"I'd gone to bed."

"Oh—I'm sorry we woke you up."

"It's a good thing you did."

They waited then. She lay with her hands over her eyes. Tommy stood by the swing, his hands at his sides.

Dad said finally: "I'd like to have a talk with Tommy, Jan."

"Well, go ahead."

"It just concerns him and me."

She told him: "It concerns me too. Whatever concerns him in this case concerns me."

"This is official."

"You know it isn't."

He said, his voice hard: "Go upstairs."

"No."

He strode away a few steps and came back.

He told her, his voice shaking on a strange new note: "This is official and personal. Tommy would prefer it confidential. I'm asking you to leave us alone for his sake."

She asked Tommy: "Do you want me to go?"

He said in a faint voice: "I don't care, Jannie—I don't care if you stay."

"All right, then," Dad said.

He and Tommy stood facing each other.

Dad said, snapping out his phrases: "Your commanding officer—Colonel Hitchens—communicated with me this afternoon. He's heard what's being said about you and Jan. He knows you're mopping up all the booze in sight. And he knows the shape your company turned out in for inspection this morning and the general value of your services to the government during the past months. He had you down as a candidate for the next Class B list. But we talked it over and both agreed finally that the best thing for you was a little solitary confinement to try and straighten you out before taking any definite steps about Class B'ing you. So the way it stands now, the next time you're seen drinking or drunk you go into a month's con in your quarters. And if that doesn't work you go into Class B. Does that make any impression or doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Tommy said.

"Now, so far I don't think the General's got wind of anything, or anything much. But he's apt to any day. And while it'll be bad enough for you if he gets wind of your boozing and inefficiency, it'll be worse for both of you if he gets onto this affair of yours and Jan's. And that's what's got to stop too. You know as well as I do the sort he is—you know how he hustled those aviators' wives off to the States on the first boat. Well, another case of passing out on the back steps at Reveille after being out all night with another woman's husband, and he's apt to do the same for Jan. So I want you and Jan both to give me your word right here that you won't make any attempt to see each other again after to-night. Now, how about it?"

She was sitting up by this time, with her face strained up in the moonlight. She glanced away and saw Tommy's face.

Tommy said, agonized: "I can't help seeing her, sir! I don't mean her any harm! I thought you knew I loved her, sir."

"All the more reason, then, to protect her name." Dad's voice was gentler. "It isn't that Mrs. Custis and I doubt either of you. It isn't a question of that. It's a question of what other folks think and say. And there're too many people mixed up in this that can suffer for the selfish, thoughtless things you do,

and if your own career doesn't mean anything to you, you've got to think of other people's lives."

Tommy said: "I can't help it, sir! I do love Jannie."

"Well, now, see here. See here. You've got to help it. You're not helping *her* any, that's sure. Neither of you is doing the other any good—you're dragging each other down. Now, Jan's had a pretty bad time of it and she's pretty much gone to pieces, but you're not helping her pull herself together any, and you're only going to pieces yourself. Now——"

She realized all at once with a shock just how badly he was going to pieces because he was standing sobbing, startling Dad's words away.

She realized too, startled herself at realizing it, that it didn't matter specially whether she saw him any more or not; that he hadn't helped her much and couldn't; that no human being, no matter how much he loves, if he is not loved in return, can help another for more than little merciful deluded moments.

She got up quickly and took Dad's arm and walked him fiercely away.

She whispered: "Leave me with him—I *promise* you, Dad, I'll send him away and won't see him any more after to-night!"

He squeezed her hand on his arm and went away silently, going fleetly up the stairs.

She turned back to Tommy, standing broken beside the swing. She saw the swing mostly, and against it a changing tableau of the love scenes in the little drama of the life of a young man with tawny hair.

She walked to him, her steps muted by the roar of a fresh flood that tore the thin beaten leaves of the tall palms.

IT STARTED raining early the day before the transport was due. She had gone to bed more exhausted than usual from long walks and swimming, but had tossed in the night heat until the rains had gone away, sleeping a drugged sleep full of dreams till the morning rains woke her, blowing through the screening, across the porch.

She was in the midst of a dream, and thought it was the day of the *Château Thierry's* coming, and sprang out of bed and ran into the rain to look at the Canal.

Mom shouted, and she backed away. Mom came stamping in and said: "Are you crazy? Look out—don't step on the rugs with your wet feet! Get out of those soaking pajamas at once or you'll catch cold!"

When she came out of the bathroom, dressed, Mom said: "Your cherished friend Barbie called you up. I certainly think she has a nerve, calling you when she knows you've turned over a new leaf."

"Did you tell her I'd call back?"

"Certainly not! I told her exactly what I thought of her—I certainly hope you don't expect to call her!"

"I certainly do."

She ran away from Mom and called Amador on the downstairs telephone, getting no answer from Barbie's quarters.

After lunch she tried again, with no answer still. She knew it would be no use to ask for the car. She lay down, feeling a queer panicky restlessness rising. After an hour she went swimming, Mom taking her to the pool and going away with the car.

She swam hard, trying to fortify herself with exhaustion against the coming night. But weariness made her weak to fight down the hysteria that was gripping her nerves.

Going through the clubhouse, she felt as though she were walking in a fever. The people on the movie billboards were monsters in a nightmare.

She called Barbie once more on the clubhouse telephone, but still got no answer. She began to worry about Barbie, remembering that it was the first time since the *St. Mibiel* had come through that Barbie had called. She knew all at once that she wanted to see Barbie badly and considered taking a bus to Amador, then realized that she might see Tommy and walked home instead in the rain.

Going up the hill beyond the Administration Building, the beauty of the vivid greens and the bright flowering trees and shrubs hurt her as the beauty of Panama had hurt her when she had first seen it eight months and a half before. She thought: I wouldn't have noticed it three years ago.

Mom and Dad finished eating alone and went upstairs. The rain was harder than usual. She had thought Mom was going to the movies at Amador, but it was past time.

The panic of the afternoon was coming back, swelling anew every little while on a fresh rush of realization of the fleeting minutes and fear of the morrow.

She knew all at once that she had to go and drive fast in the rain.

There was no sound from upstairs. She slipped out of the swing and down the porch and went through the screen door noiselessly and slid into the car under the mango tree.

She heard Mom yell as she backed out, but she shot the car ahead.

With the release of energy, her hysteria rose unleashed, and she swung through the outskirts of the town trembling over the wheel in a torment of nervousness. She knew then that she wanted a drink, and that she must have it or collapse, alone in the car between the fields outside the town.

She pressed the accelerator, fixing as her goal the roadhouse where she knew her credit would be good. The rain coming in under the open windshield streaked her face.

The miles flew past, and she swung in at the familiar lights. She stood on the brake then, to keep from crashing into a car parked at the side under the trees, and went into reverse quickly, pulling down the windshield.

She had not seen who it was, but he saw her and sprang out

of his taxi and wrenched her door open and jumped in beside her, gasping: "Jannie!"

She was confused and stopped the car midway across the road while he half smothered her, kissing her, pressing his hands wildly against her face and hair.

"Jannie—I thought I'd never see you again!"

She gave herself up to him for a moment, shaken vaguely in spite of herself by the old sweet scent of him and the familiarity of him: of his hands and lips and the little scratch of his cheeks that had always come about the time the dark had begun to fade away those nights since the beginning when they had stayed out till dawn.

She realized then that he was in cits and remembered, and pushed him away.

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you?"

"You know you're not supposed to be drinking! Go home before they see you and put you in con!"

"I'm in con now, Jannie! Didn't your Dad tell you? They caught me three days ago—oh, God, I had to drink—I damn near went nuts, ten days on the wagon!"

"You're in con *now*? Then what are you doing out here?"

"I broke it, Jannie! Don't look like that—I had to! They won't catch me this time, I'm in cits—they wouldn't have before if I'd been careful."

She said, shaking him: "You go home! Don't you know what it means if they catch you this time?" She pleaded then: "Oh, Tommy—Tommy—*please* go home!"

"I will, Jannie, after just a couple of drinks! I'll take a bottle home with me then and drink at home, but I've got to have just one or two now, first. You come and have them with me, please."

She pleaded, kissing him and shaking him: "Oh, but that can only end one way. Don't take any home with you—they'll find you tight, and that'll be just the same! Please, please go home now without taking any along!"

He told her: "Then you come and have just two with me, Jannie, and I will. Just have two double Scotches, and I'll go home, and I won't take any back. Will you?"

She gasped: "Promise?"

"Yes! You can see for yourself if I buy any."

She leaned forward on the wheel wearily and ran the car past his, to be hidden from the road.

They drank together almost in silence, his arm around her tightly.

After the second, he said: "Have another, Jannie—just one more."

"You promised——"

"I know, but I won't get tight on three. Wouldn't you like another?"

She knew that she would like another and another and another, until she would not be able to lift the next. She knew too that she was at rest for the first time in weeks. But she wanted to be very drunk, because she was afraid of the panic coming back.

She sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder: "All right—order one more."

It came presently, and they sipped it slowly.

"God, Jannie, this is almost peace again."

"I know."

They kissed, and he buried his face against her neck. "Oh, God—I thought I'd never see you any more."

"I didn't mean you to."

"But, Jannie, I've got to—you know that."

"I'll go away—you'll forget me then."

"I won't! I never can forget you, you know that! Don't talk about going away, Jannie—where would you go?"

She shook her head.

He said: "*He* comes through to-morrow, doesn't he?"

"Oh, don't talk about that."

"But he does—I know he does. Jannie! You won't go with him!"

She shook her head wildly, pushing him away. "Oh, please let me forget for a little while!"

"But you won't make up with him, will you? You won't, will you, Jannie?"

She said: "We're not mad at each other. At least—I don't

think he is at me. I hope he isn't. I don't want him to hate me."

"But you won't go back to him, will you, Jannie?"

"Oh, I don't want to talk about it!"

"But you don't love him still, do you?"

She moaned, lying: "Oh, I don't know."

The panic was coming back. She turned her face against his shoulder, sobbing breathlessly, like a frightened child.

"Don't, Jannie! Don't cry! Don't! Don't!"

She said: "I want another drink! But don't you have any more, please!"

The waiter looked out into the rain, and Tommy called: "*Dos mas.*"

"No, no, not *dos—uno!*" She pleaded with him: "Oh, you don't need any more—you don't feel like I do!"

"God, I feel worse."

She sobbed: "I'm just rotten! I don't even keep promises any more. Oh, I want the whole damn world to know how rotten I am, and then I'll go kill myself!"

"Shut up, Jannie, you're getting tight."

"I'm not! I'm not! I've only had three!"

"Well, you can't hold your liquor any more, then. *You* better not have any more."

"I'll have all I damn please! I was coming out to get tight by myself anyway, and you can't stop me!"

"All right, then you shouldn't try to stop me. We'll get tight together—shall we?"

She remembered vaguely about his going home. "But—but——"

"The later I get back, the less chance of anyone being up to see. Isn't that so?"

She knew she was weak and somewhat drunk now, and only wanted to be drunker and to keep him with her a little longer on this last night.

She was sure she was drunk then, because she was starting to think to herself in a certain way.

Why is it the last night, fool? The last night of what?

The last night before he comes through, of course.

Oh.

New rain came down in a gust on the car roof. The waiter ran out in it and ran back, holding the empty tray over his head.

When they left to drive in the taxi the rain was coming harder, slowing the car and blowing it like a ship.

At Old Panama the moon went under a cloud. Somewhere far off behind the cathedral-tower ghost a dog's voice rose in a wail, muffled by the roar of the rain. She shivered, and he asked: "What's the matter?"

"Didn't you hear the dog? The day I knew about Frances dying, one howled on the Juan Diaz road. It means someone's going to die again!"

"But Frances had already died, hadn't she, when you heard that one?"

She was confused, but she insisted: "Well, anyway, it always means death."

Swinging in the circle, bearing closer to the tower, they heard it again, and he held his hand over her ear, pressing her head down against his breast.

The drone of the car and the loud *tat-a-tat* on the top made them half sleep in each other's arms over miles of flickering road made black by the rain.

A sharp popping sound made them lift their heads.

"What was that—a shot?"

"Somebody's tire, I guess."

They were thrown away from the seat back by the car slowing down; the driver muttered in Spanish.

"Is it ours?"

"What's the matter—got a flat tire?"

Up ahead the lights of a cantina were distorted in the streaking rain.

Tommy said: "Hey, what's the matter, *hombre*? *Qué pasa*?"

"I don't know. Some cars stop on de road."

The car that was parked across the road opposite the lights speeded ahead then, madly, passing them, the driver opening the curtained door and shouting something in Spanish as he shot by.

"What is it? What is it?"

"What did he say, *hombre*?"

"*Caramba*, he say, 'murder'!"

"Oh, good God!"

She cried, scrambling out of his arms: "Oh, look, look, it *is*! Oh, somebody's killed! Look, look, he's there on the ground!"

People were running out of the roadhouse, collecting around someone lying in the rain under the glare of the lights and the headlights of the other car.

"*Sigue, hombre!* Get the hell on and let's see what's up!"

They saw then that an army officer was standing outside the group, holding a revolver dangling at his side, and an American girl was wringing her hands and screaming.

"Jan, it's Barbie and Juddy!"

"Oh, no, no——"

"Yes, it is!"

She threw the car door open and sprang out, stumbling, chilled by the awful crying coming from Barbie. She thought she was going to faint before she could get to Barbie, who was sliding to her knees on the wet road beside Juddy, still standing with the revolver in his hand, looking like a crazy man.

She got Barbie back to her feet, holding her up fiercely, slapping her in the face, not able to say anything on account of her own teeth chattering.

Barbie started crying, "Mamma! Mamma! Mamma! Oh, Mamma!" over and over and over.

She stood holding Barbie and saw Tommy take the gun away from Juddy. Juddy didn't seem to know him, but let him take it. Tommy pushed through the group of cantina patrons and waiters and musicians and cabaret girls, waving hands and jabbering Spanish around the man lying on the ground.

Barbie kept flinging about, trying to break away, crying and choking all the time: "Juddy killed him! Juddy killed him!" She fought away finally and threw herself upon Juddy, hanging to his shoulder straps and his hair when he tried to push her away.

"I didn't, I didn't, I never did, Juddy, I never did, I never never did. I swear I didn't, Juddy, I swear—I swear I never did, Juddy, I never did. . . ."

He flung her from him, ripping a shoulder strap loose, and she threw her arms around Janet, crying: "I didn't, Jan, I never was untrue to him! He's killed him because he thinks I was, but I wasn't—you tell him I wasn't, Jan, you make him believe it, because it's the truth! I swear by God and Jesus Christ and——"

She fainted, slipping down at Janet's feet with such leaden weight that she pulled her down too. Janet dragged her up again, gasping to Juddy: "Juddy, *help* me, for God's sake, *please* help me put her in the car!"

Juddy stood still, staring at them with the crazy look on his face. Then Tommy was carrying Barbie into the roadhouse, the cabaret girls following, running.

She pushed into the circled group, clinging to a waiter's arm, and saw Paquito lying on his back with a bloodstain running out of his bared chest heaped with wadded handkerchiefs soaked with blood and rain. The Panamanians squatting on the ground holding his wrists were shouting, "*Sí, sí, sí—vive, vive!*" Tommy was there again, then, starting to lift Paquito up, the men helping. But all of a sudden Juddy was in the circle pushing Tommy away, the insane look going out of his face.

"You God damn fool, get out of here—get back to your quarters—get the hell out of here, both of you, you fools, or you'll be in it too!"

A motorcycle was coming from the direction of Old Panama, its *put-a-put-a-put-a* carrying through the drum of the rain.

She seized Tommy's hand, pleading hoarsely: "Come on, it's a cop—oh, come on before he gets here—oh, hurry up, quick——"

She dragged him with her with a sudden terrific strength, and when he saw her sobbing urgent face at the taxi door he remembered and jumped in, pulling her after him, and the car shot away, passing the scene under the lights, whizzing into the rain and the dark.

She gasped: "Was he dead?"

"No, and I don't think he'll die, but he might!"

"What will they do to Juddy if he does?"

"What *do* they do to murderers? It's first degree——"

"But who'll try him? The army'll take him, won't it, and court-martial him?"

"No, because it's on Panamanian territory! They'll keep him themselves! And a great show he'll have when it's a Panamanian he shot!"

She shuddered, putting her hands over her face: "Oh, I can't stand anything more. Oh, poor Barbie—oh, poor kid——"

"Yes, and poor little baby Barbie Lou. Oh, good God, how can anybody play around like that when they've got kids?"

He put his arm around her, smoothing her hair back from her face, drenched with tears and sweat and rain.

"Never mind, Jannie, don't cry. It'll come out all right some way, don't worry. I don't think he'll die—I know it was way clear of his heart. It's just in his lungs, and his pulse was pretty strong. All the liquor in him'll help him fight. That cop'll get him right into a hospital, and they'd stopped the blood a good deal, anyhow, with all those handkerchiefs."

He told her, his cheek against her temple: "I'm glad you were there to take care of Barbie."

"Oh, I couldn't do much—she was *crazy*."

"She was tight as hell. Juddy was cold sober, but he acted crazier still. He acts as if he hates her. Oh, God, we damn near forgot—you've got to get your car."

The lights of the next cantina were showing up ahead. He told the driver to stop.

"Can you drive all right, or shall I drive you home? He can follow along behind."

"Oh, no, no, I'm all right—you hurry on home. What did you do with Juddy's pistol?"

"Left it in the house back there. I'm not that dumb."

The taxi slowed down, and she sat up, sighing.

"Jannie, just let me drive along with you in my car, to be sure you get home."

"Oh, no, don't—we'd just attract attention driving together—I want to go slow, anyway, and sober up more before getting home."

"But, Jannie, when will I see you again?"

She knew, kissing him good-bye, that he probably never would see her again, since he might not stay in the army, and

she knew surely that she was kissing him for the last time in their lives; and knowing both things, and knowing that he did not know either of them, she felt an intense pity for him, since he must know them sometime and soon.

He whispered: "I love you, Jannie."

She said, "Good-night," gently, and drew out of his arms and watched his car start up and saw him wave back through the window.

She went to her car and got in and backed out slowly, waiting for the glow up ahead that was his taxi to grow dim far down the road. Then she followed, moving the gear lever as though her muscles were paralyzed with fatigue, but laying her cheek down on her arms on the wheel, free at last of her burden of indecision, feeling a great weary ultimate peace.

She climbed the stairs at eleven-thirty. Dad came to meet her in his pajamas and bathrobe, grieved worried questions in his eyes.

She told him: "Juddy's shot Paquito! Out on the Sabanas road—I saw the whole thing!"

Mom came hurrying out of her room. "What? What, Janny?"

She told them about it, looking from one to the other of their shocked faces, all standing in the upstairs hall.

"Oh, can't you *do* something, Dad?"

He paced up and down, shaking his head, kneading his fist in his other hand.

"Afraid the law'll have to take its course. Don't know how stiff the law is here."

"But can't the army take him and court-martial him—keep him among Americans, at least?"

"Afraid not—it was outside army bounds. Looks like everything depends on whether the fellow pulls through or not. Think they'd have him at the hospital by now?"

"Yes! They ought to! They'd take him to the Bella Vista!"

Mom went to the telephone. They told her he had just been brought in and that he was alive and on the operating table at the moment.

Mom and Dad stayed in Mom's room, talking about the affair in shocked tones.

She thought, starting her packing mechanically in her own room: He'll die! Because the dog howled. Oh, God, God——

She had her trunk locker half filled when Mom came in.

"Why, what are you doing?"

"Packing. I'm going to the Philippines with Dickie. I made up my mind to-night."

"Why, Janny!"

Dad in the doorway then, at Mom's side. "Huh? You going to the P. I. with Dickie?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, hold on. Hold on. Maybe they've got him bunking with some other fellow. How do you know you can get transportation?"

"See if I can!"

"How on earth do you think he's going to see at this hour? Don't be so foolish!"

She said: "I thought you'd be glad."

"I am glad, of course, but I think it's foolish to expect to get transportation on the same boat with him. Let your father put in for it on the next——"

"But I want to go to-morrow! They can fix it some way!"

"The transport isn't coming through to-morrow, anyhow, Jan," Dad told her, "so you'll have an extra day to get ready. We'll find out about accommodations in the morning."

"Isn't coming through?"

"Not to-morrow. Major Jones called this evening and said he'd heard officially—she gets in late in the afternoon and docks at Cristobal overnight. Don't know if Dickie'll even have time to make the evening train across."

"But—but isn't she going to stop on this side at all?"

"Well, I don't know—Major Jones thought she was scheduled to put in at Balboa about an hour, but he wasn't sure."

Mom and Dad went back into Mom's room to talk about the shooting. She went on packing, whispering: "Oh, God, you won't let anything slip up now—I've got to go—oh, God, you needn't ever do anything for me again in all my life or pay

any attention to any prayer, if you just let me go back to him now! This is the last thing I'll ever ask of you as long as I live, if you'll just let me get on that boat and sail out with him day after to-morrow!"

In an hour Mom called the hospital. They said that the operation was over and that his condition was favorable.

THE hot new day woke her unrested, spent by her dreams: little vivid relivings of all the old bitternesses and futilities and heartbreaks; the same dreams that had tormented her night after night for a month or more each time after they had parted, awaking her by their very unbearableness, finally, every morning, leaving her always exhausted and haggard and more desolate and bitter than before.

Her pajamas and her hair were drenched with perspiration, and she felt stifled and ill, but she whispered: "I know all that, God. I haven't forgotten. You don't need to remind me—we'll just try to make it different this time, that's all."

She dragged out of bed and took a cold shower and dressed.

Mom called from downstairs: "Janny? Are you up? Who's in Hawaii now that you know?"

"Nobody."

"Well, here's a letter for you from Honolulu. On the card tray."

"Oh, it's probably from Pinky Collins—but I don't know why."

"No, I think it's a woman's writing."

"Well, I don't know, then."

She went down presently and picked it up off the card tray. Its writing spoke aloud in a remembered voice, and she gasped and dropped it, and stood staring at it lying on the floor. She clutched it up again then, in a frenzy, and ran out to the porch, tearing it open, and stood by the screening reading it frantically, her hands shaking so that she had to put it down on the screening ledge to see.

It said, written hastily:

DARLING GIRL:

We're getting in to Honolulu. I should have written before, perhaps, but I haven't wanted what I say to lie around unmailed.

Dear, I had counted so on a visit with you. I had thought we would surely stop on the Pacific side. And to have to shout platitudes to you over a transport's rail and see the space widen and widen between us—it shook me so.

I have only a few minutes. I want to tell you now the things I would have then. You stood by me so, darling, at Jonathan Wayde. You never doubted. Or perhaps you were fond enough of me not to care. But no, you would have cared—you were such a clean, straightforward little girl. You must just have trusted. And your trust was justified, dear kid.

That is one thing I have wanted to tell you. But I want you to understand so much more. Where I am going seems so far. When I shall see you again seems so vague. And I want you to know these things before another month, even another day, goes by, so that you needn't be cheated any longer by illusions if it is that that your affection for me has been built on, so that when we do meet again no more need be held back by me than has ever been by you. But I don't know how you feel about these matters now—oh, if only I could have talked to *you*, instead of a piece of paper on a ship's rail—perhaps I'll never know your answer now—perhaps you won't speak. I'm incoherent, darling, but time, pushing, pressing, confuses me. The thing I want you to know is just this: I was such a coward about army poverty, and I married Caleb because he was a major and because, since I was not in love with anyone and therefore didn't take love very seriously, it seemed a wise thing to do, and I was pleased with myself for my good sense, as was my mother. I met D. after we got back from the Philippines, when Donny was three. We fell in love at once and have loved each other ever since—desperately. Caleb knows, but won't divorce me—doesn't believe in divorce. So I have lived on with him, having no grounds myself, and have not been untrue, because I could not have been while still sharing his home. But, darling, this is what I want you to know—if it had not been for one element, I would have gone to D.—given up my life to him (as he would have given up his career for me) and not thought myself a sinner—leaving Donny for Caleb—I'd

have done even that, Jan—hoping, praying that my little son would understand some day and not blame his mother too bitterly, and that then I might have him again. He is a fair little boy—perhaps it was only because of my faith in his fairness and his potential wisdom and his love for me that I could dream of such a separation. But I would have done it, Jan. Do you hate me for it, dearest, or do you understand? You who love someone you too feel you may not have, and yet who is yours rightfully—you who will not make the little sacrifices such a love as that asks of you—*can* you understand sacrifice of this sort to love of someone who can never, never be honorably one's own? Try to, darling, because if I really felt that I were losing you now my life would have no comfort left.

We are getting so near. The brown boys and girls are coming out to the ship in their little boats. I could not go to D. because Donny is going to West Point. West Point has been the guiding spirit of his little-boyhood, and a career in the army his goal. So I could not have follow him through that career the whisper that his mother ran away with a man. Oh, it seems so absurd that in this supposedly broad-minded, understanding age, such a thing could affect a young man's life. Yet you know our people, our army, and know as I do that it would.

And now you have read from your wanton Frances's own pen that she would spend her life in "sin" with the man she loves—but that sordid "woods" affair at Jonathan Wayde—oh, darling, we went to pick little red berries that Dutch had seen through the brush the day before. For my bridge party—don't you remember them on the mantels?

I have not written for the last five minutes. The brown kiddies are diving from the ship's sides. Donny and his father are throwing them pennies. The dock is so frighteningly near. People are waiting on it, waving.

He is there on the dock.

Jan, beloved, I wish that I were dead.

F.

She realized that Mom was calling; shouting from upstairs.
"What?"

"For heaven's sake, are you deaf? I say, who is your letter from?"

"Oh—Mrs. Varks—you know—that came through on the—when Pinky did."

"Oh. Well, she certainly must write an engrossing letter. What does she say?"

"Oh—just tells about the place, mostly—she likes it."

She had been so far away that the porch and the palmettos and the living room inside the windows rushed against her consciousness with an impact. She dropped her gaze and went far away again, reading the letter through once more and coming back. Mom was stamping to and fro in the upstairs hall. She got up unsteadily and walked to the kitchen, reading still on the way. The cook was in her room around the back porch. She lit the gas slowly, turning it low. She said, almost aloud, half crying: "Oh, God, I'd rather keep this than anything I know right now in the world!"

She kissed the letter wildly. The cook was moving about in her room. She turned the gas high, holding the letter above the blue tongues, and carried it, flaming, to the sink.

§ 2

LATE in the afternoon Barbie said in a broken voice over the telephone: "Oh, Jan—come over——"

"I will! Where are you, at your house? Gosh, I've been phoning all afternoon!"

"I just got in—I've been—you know——"

"I'll be right over! Right away!"

"Hurry!"

She called: "Mom, I'm going to see Barbie."

"Well, go ahead. Give the poor child my sympathy and love."

She sped through Balboa, hardly watching for the Zone police.

She ran up on Barbie's porch, calling, and getting no answer went on inside.

Barbie came out of the bedroom looking so shattered and old and pitiful that Janet stared at her, unable to say a word.

Barbie said, making her voice hard: "I know I look about a hundred. I don't ever expect to look like myself again, but what the hell does it matter! If you'd cried in all your life as much as I have the last eighteen or nineteen hours——"

Janet threw her arms around her. They dropped down together on the davenport.

"I'm just—all finished—ol' girl——"

"No, no, you're not!"

"Yes, I am. Juddy hates me."

"Is Paquito all right?"

"Oh, yes, he'll get well—it won't be murder. But it's still attempted murder, and they'll put Juddy in jail—oh, God, that awful place—that's where I've been all this time—in a cell, Jan, all night and to-day. And all the damn questioning, and the reporters from the *Panama-American* and the rest. Oh, and all the Panamanians hanging around, ogling and sneering, and some of the officials pretending to be so damn polite, when it's so plain what they all think of me, and why the hell shouldn't they——"

"Well, how did they come to finally let you go?"

"When the doctors said Paquito was all right—they let me out then. But I've got to still be a witness against Juddy on the assault charge, or whatever it is."

"Did you see Juddy?"

"No, they wouldn't let me, but he wouldn't have, anyway. He doesn't want to see me. He sent me awful messages—he *hates* me. And, Jan, he's going to get a—divorce as soon as he gets out, and they—they'll give him Barbie Lou!"

"But how *can* they? Why, they couldn't—why, he can't—why——"

"Yes, they will. Because I'm not a fit person—to bring her up!"

"But how can Juddy get a divorce when you never were untrue?"

Barbie moaned: "Oh, you don't know all that's happened. Paquito says I was."

"Paquito *says*——"

"Oh, he was delirious—he raved and raved. And everybody

heard—and now he won't take back anything—he just shrugs and says if he said it it must be true!”

“Oh, my gosh!”

“Oh, he hates me too. Because he couldn't get me. That's how they are—the other boys kidded him—about not getting anything—oh, you don't know them, Jan. And that's what made him so furious—that's why he got to acting the way he did. Oh, we fought like hell last night—that's what was going on when Juddy got there. Oh, you don't want to hear—it's too rotten for you to listen to.”

“No it isn't. I want to know.”

“Oh, well, we got awfully tight at the first place, and he tried to get me to go upstairs there, but I bluffed him out and got him away, and then I begged him to take me home, but he wouldn't, and we drove on, and his liquor hit him more in the taxi and when we got to the next place he was just like a wild man—he had the car stop and we started fighting, and he dragged me out—and just then Juddy drove up—oh, it was just like the movies—oh, God—and Juddy didn't wait to get any explanation or know what it was all about—he just fired——”

“Good gosh, it's a wonder he didn't hit you!”

“Oh, he's a good shot. He knew who he was aiming at—he never meant to get me. He just shot once—right where he meant to—or maybe an inch off——”

“But—but couldn't he see you were struggling—that you didn't want to——”

“No, he didn't notice that—he was crazy mad—he just saw Paquito with his arms around me, and I guess we just looked tight as hell, and we were.”

Barbie sobbed then: “I didn't want to go out with him last night! I wanted to see you! I called you up, and your Mom gave me hell—she made me feel like two cents!”

“I know, I'm sorry. But I called you.”

“Did you? Well, I didn't answer the phone all the rest of the afternoon because I didn't think she'd tell you at all, and I was afraid it would be him.”

“But you never let him call you up!”

"Sure I did—during Juddy's office hours. Not often, but sometimes he did. But, anyway, finally I did answer, and it was him, sure enough. And I said I'd go. I *knew* I would if I couldn't go to see you! Oh, God, if I'd only answered before when you called!"

Someone was coming up the steps. A young woman's voice said: "Hi, there, Barbie—you home, honey? I thought I heard you. Don't you want your child?"

Barbie jumped up, dabbing at her eyes. "Oh, keep her a while, Mary, please—I look like hell!"

Barbie Lou ran in, calling: "Moth-er! Moth-er!"

"Oh, sweetest——"

Barbie picked her up and held her tightly, kissing her neck.

Mrs. Tilson said: "Hi, Mrs. Blythe—how're you?" She put her arms around Barbie and Barbie Lou. "You poor li'l lamb—everybody's so sorry."

Barbie choked: "You can leave her, Mary—thanks so much——"

"That's all right, honey—any time at all I can help with her—take her back now if you want—I thought you'd want her. She's a precious angel—Sonny's got a terrific case on her. Listen now, honey, anything at all I can do to help, just let me know—you hear?"

Mary Tilson left, and Barbie said: "She's been wonderful. They talked a lot before, but they've been darn decent since this. She took care of Barbie Lou all last night."

Barbie Lou's tiny hands touched her mother's swollen eyes.

"What did you c'y for, Moth-er?"

"Because I had to stay away from my little girl all nightie-night."

"Oh. I c'ied too."

"Oh, darling——"

Barbie got up, holding her tightly, and carried her away. She came back presently, alone, all broken again, crumpling into Janet's arms.

"Oh, Jan—if they take that kid away from me I'll just die! I will! I'll kill myself!"

"Oh, shut up—they won't, anyway."

"Yes, they will—they'll take everything! Juddy and—oh, Jan, I don't want him to go to jail! My Juddy in jail! Oh, God, I want him back—I love him so—damn it, I always did!"

She sobbed on Janet's shoulder, on the davenport: "I'm such a God damn fool, Jan! I know I had it coming to me—I deserved all I got! But they don't—it wasn't Juddy's fault, Jan—it was this damn army! *They* drove him to it, whispering their dirty lies—he believed them, and now he won't believe me! Oh, if God'd just give me one break, and if I can't keep my husband at least let me keep my baby and get her away from this God damn sneaking low-down army, and get her some place where she'll have a chance——"

She knew, with a little shock of wonder at her own reaction, that Barbie's words chilled her with a certain queer horror.

Barbie cried bitterly, and after a while, patting her, Janet said: "Oh, maybe we're wrong. Maybe it isn't just the army—maybe you'd find the same thing wherever you went—maybe not in a big city, but at least in any small community."

"Well, I never knew anything else but the army, but I don't see how anything else *could* be as bad!"

Janet said, sighing: "Well, I guess I'm casting my lot with it for the rest of my days."

"Jan! Then you're going back to Dickie?"

She said: "If he wants me to. I can get transportation—they can put the man that's in with him with somebody else whose roommate's getting off here."

Barbie said, clasping her tightly: "If it was any time but now, I'd be glad."

"Well, I'm not gone yet. Maybe he won't want me. Maybe he'll just want to see me to talk about a divorce so he can marry somebody else."

"You know damn well he won't. He'll want you, all right. You're as good as gone, ol' girl—and I *am* glad. You'll keep out of mischief now. Have a baby, ol' girl, that'll keep you out of mischief—at least, it's supposed to."

Janet said: "I don't want one yet. Later on, maybe, after we get back from the Philippines."

Barbie cried, hugging her: "Oh, I am glad. Not that you're staying in the army, because I don't think you'll ever be happy

in it—but that you're going back to Dickie again, because I don't think you'd ever be happy away from him."

She said, trying to laugh, but feeling chill again: "I guess that sums up my life."

After she left Barbie she drove home, sunk in a torpid depression come as reaction from the nervous tension of the day. It was the dinner hour, but she drove slowly, hoping Mom and Dad would be finished eating. She was dawdling out past the piers when she remembered suddenly that Dickie might have caught the evening train across the Isthmus, and turned back.

It was dark when she got home. She ran the car under the mango tree and, getting out, heard Mom and Dad talking on the porch. She crouched in the car door, listening, knowing from their tones that someone was with them. Dickie's voice went through her then, like a cold blade, and she stumbled out and stood transfixed in the rain.

Coming again, it released her, and she went pellmell around the house and headlong up the steps, tearing the screen door back.

She stopped in the doorway, gripping its sides, staring at him, holding her breath; staring at his same red hair, and his hazel eyes with new lines around them, and his thinner cheeks.

He looked up at her, what he was saying dwindling away. They looked at each other for several moments. Mom and Dad didn't speak. Then he got up and pushed his chair back and came to meet her, thinner in his whites that she had never seen before, saying, "Hello, darlin'!"

She rushed to him, and they went into each other's arms violently. She heard Mom and Dad going quietly away through the side living-room door.

They stood for a long while spattered by the rain flicking off the bougainvillea. Then they walked to the swing, unsteadily, arms around each other fiercely still, and sat down in it and went into a new frenzy, until she fell to sobbing in little shuddering hysterical spasms, and he said huskily: "Shut up, kid, you're going nuts!"

She quieted at last, and he said: "Well, how about kissing me,

huh?" and held her face back with both his hands and kissed her lips again and again.

She threw her arms around him once more, frantically, gasping: "Oh, I thought I was never going to see you again—ever."

"Gosh, I thought I was never going to see you. What the hell'd you go away for, anyhow, darlin'? What a damn dumb thing to do!"

They heard the back door shut; Dad going to his office.

She babbled: "I thought you wouldn't make the train—I didn't think you'd want to—I thought you wouldn't want to see me at all—or at least, maybe just to tell me you wanted a— a divorce!"

"For God's sake, darlin'! What would I want with a divorce?"

"If you'd found somebody else——"

"For God's sake, kid! Did you think I would have?"

"I didn't know."

He laughed at her, kissing her, catching her violently to him again.

"Not a chance, ol'-timer. After you? After my darlin'? Not by a damn sight! I kind of had my worries about you, though. How about it, huh? Sure you haven't found some fellow you think you'd rather be married to?"

"Oh, no, no, no!"

"You're not sure?"

"Yes, yes! I am!"

He kissed her again; kissed her over and over. "Well, I didn't know—I didn't know whether you'd be interested in seeing your husband or not. That's why I didn't take any chances on calling up from the other side. I just grabbed my cap and dashed."

"What time does the transport get through?"

"Not till four or four-thirty. Then she hangs around till five-thirty or so, so we've got lots of time, darlin'."

She shivered against him, feeling frightened and confused.

"You're pretty nervous still, aren't you, kid? Damn it, you don't look so well—don't the tropics agree with you? You're thinner than you were when you got back from New York."

"Oh, I know—I know I look like hell."

"How come? You been hitting the high spots? Painting the town—huh?"

"Oh—not specially. I'm just—so tired——"

He kissed her gently, then; kissed her lips and cheeks and forehead and nose and chin, and hid his face in her damp hair, sniffing its fragrance.

He said: "My God, kid, what's been happening to all our friends? Gosh, Frances dead, and now Juddy shooting up a guy—what the hell's coming off? Is everybody going nuts?"

"Oh, don't talk about it now—I know, it's awful—I can't stand to think about it all any more—not now—just let me have *you*—please."

She thought, quite calmly: And when I don't have you any more—if you *do* sail out of here to-morrow and don't take me—why, something'll happen to me, too.

She thought then, her heart breaking: Oh, God—only one little night? Oh, no, no, no, no, please, please——

She whispered: "Lie down."

He switched out the light, and settling down, he said, patting the sagging canvas back: "My God—damn if it ain't the same old swing!"

She lay across his breast. His hands moved over her head and shoulders and back, trembling.

He sighed: "Gosh, darlin'—is it really you?"

A pang of fear shot through her heart, completing its breaking. The rain beat on the palmetto leaves.

She heard him saying, after a long while, clearing his throat: "This'd be a swell country if it didn't rain so much. But we're going to a better one. How about it, kid—got your stuff all packed?"

She cried then, violently, without a sound, upon his breast.

"What's the matter, kid? Huh? Don't you want to come along?"

"Do you want me to?"

"For God's sake! Did you think I didn't?"

He tried to lift her face to kiss her again, but she kept it down tight against his breast, sobbing still.

"Kid! Look up here! What's the matter, huh? Darlin', what's the matter?"

She sobbed: "H-h-haven't you been true to me?"

His hands dropped away from her face, and he lay very still, breathing lightly without a sound.

In the time she lay waiting for him to answer, the *Château Thierry* might have come on through and crossed the ocean and come back again and docked in New York.

He said at last, gently: "Well, I'll tell you, kid. I'll tell you how it was. When you left, I was just sort of all shot to hell. Darlin'—you just don't know what you did to me. I didn't give a good God damn whether school kept or not. And that's how I was feeling when I got to Augusta. And the fellows down there saw something was wrong, and took me in hand and set out to get me over what ailed me. Well, they didn't do that. They never did do that, kid. But they did help me to find out that getting back in the old-time drinking spirit did help a hell of a lot—yes, sir, it helped, kid. And then—then I got to thinking it over, and kicking myself for a damn fool, and remembering how positive you were that you weren't ever coming back—and I said to myself, I said, 'Here, damn it, make some dates and look some other fems over, and try 'em out, and see if some of 'em don't stack up fair enough beside her! What the hell!' But they didn't, kid. No, sir, not a one. Or anywhere near. Not beside my darlin'. And that's the honest truth, believe it or not!"

She was leaning back, away from him, staring down at him through the dark.

"What's the matter, kid? It's no more than you did once—than you've probably done again. Is it?"

She cried, anguished: "Dickie! Oh, don't fool me! Do you mean you just necked—or—or——"

"For God's sake," he said, "what do you think? Do you think I'd do anything else, still being married to you?"

She stared at him, then fell across him again, clutching him fiercely, sobbing violently anew in a passion of nervous relief.

He told her, patting her back: "You don't ever have to worry about anything like that, kid. I wouldn't do a thing like that to you. Not unless you had a divorce decree right in your hand. And, by God, you'll never have that."

She went on crying, quietly, lying limply across his breast.

"What's the matter, darlin'? Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, yes. Of course. But it just—hurts so like hell to think of you necking anybody else!"

"Then you know how I felt, a while ago."

He asked her then, startling her, for she had forgotten that she had a transgression in the world: "How about you, while you've been down here? Huh? Didn't the tropics get you, the way the books claim they do?"

She was silent, and he said: "Come on, confess. I won't get sore this time, kid—damn it, it *was* different this time, with both of us thinking we might honest-to-God be split up for good. And knowing you, darlin', I wouldn't expect you to have gone eight months and a half without a little necking now and then. I wouldn't believe you if you told me you had!"

She thought, lifting her head to smile tremulously at him in the dark, conscious of a little surge of thanksgiving: Oh, he is different now. We'll be happy this time. This is the way he should have been before.

She told him impulsively, confidently: "Tommy was here—still is, but it's all over now. And he was unhappy and so was I, so—we've been consoling each other. And he's the only one, the whole time—except a couple of others that didn't count, before he and I ever started at all."

Her hand, touching his face, found scowl knots between his brows.

"Tommy? Who—Burke?"

"Yes, of course."

He said, mimicking her: "Of course! *That* son of a ——! I might have known! I'd forgotten all about his going to be down here!"

She flung: "He isn't that! Anyway, what difference does it make who——"

"I thought he was married! Where the hell's his wife been?"

She told him, patiently: "He's awfully unhappy. And she is too. She's going to have a baby—she's gone back to the States now. She's awfully sweet, but he's just not in love with her—he's drinking terribly, and I'm afraid he's going to get Class B'ed."

He sat up, holding her away roughly. "So that's the kind of a mess you've been mixed up in! For God's sake——"

"But, Dickie——"

"Swiping other women's husbands! I got kind of used to your taking one fellow's wife to hand around to other men, but this is a new angle! And a poor girl that's pregnant, at that, and can't look out for herself—but, hell, that's right, you couldn't be expected to have any sympathy for anyone going to have a baby!"

He pushed her away, and said, "God!" in disgust, and sat turned away from her, his elbows on his knees.

She crouched in the other end of the swing. "But, Dickie—you don't understand at all——"

"The hell I don't! What is there to understand?"

She whimpered: "I'd forgotten you hated him so."

"I don't hate the bastard! But, damn it, I know the kind of talk there's bound to have been going around over a thing like that! It doesn't make me feel like going out and getting tight to celebrate, thinking of it following us to the Philippines that you're the woman that ran around so in Panama and that all the talk was about! How would you feel about it if you were me?"

She flung: "How do I know talk won't follow us on account of what you did in Augusta? I already knew you were drinking—that nobody down there had ever seen you sober!"

"You did, huh? Well, that might be, but you'll never hear about me running around with any married women!"

She was seeing a transport moving away from a pier; churning into the stream and sailing out the Canal to the sea.

She pleaded brokenly: "Oh, Dickie—Dickie—*please*, let's not do like this. Oh, I've had such a hell of a time—and loved you so, and only wanted to stay away so you'd be happy—that's why I started with him at all, because I was so miserable and lonely for you and so crazy, and scared to keep on being alone. But I didn't love him, Dickie—I never have—I don't care if I never see him again! I hope I don't—I'm just sorry for him because he's so unhappy, and I know so well what it's like to be that, and I don't want to be any more—I want *you*—I've wanted you all this while, only I wouldn't admit it at first. Oh, I know now I can't ever live without you——"

She choked, and sat in the corner of the swing with her hands over her face. He turned slowly and looked at her, and

then reached out and pulled her back to him, sighing, slipping down again on the pillows.

"Damn it, I love you, kid."

"Oh, I do you too!"

"Why can't we act nice to each other?"

"I guess people that love each other never do."

"Well, we'll try. We'll try like hell. By gosh, it's a good time now to start all over again—a *real* new start. We're going a hell of a long way off, ol'-timer, to a different country altogether, and we're in a different branch and all set to make new friends. And now we've got all our little infidelities off our chests and the slate's clean for new writing. And let's start out by writing, 'Play square from now on, and keep our tempers' on it—huh?"

She lay beside him not breathing, for she was realizing with crucifying forcibleness that the slate was not clean.

She fought with herself, terrified, not to think or care or, above all, let him see, but in the moment of fighting she lost, because he felt her heart lurch and thump and noticed her queer stillness.

"What's the matter, kid?"

She gave a terrific shaken sigh, not meaning to.

"Kid—what is it?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes, it is. What is it, huh?"

She shook her head, knowing fear as she had never known it in her life.

"Yes, it is, damn it. Something's on your mind. Did you leave out something you should have told? Kid—did you?"

"No, no, no—it isn't anything, Dickie! I—my head just hurt—I've got a headache——"

"The hell you have. Something's the matter. What is it, huh? Go ahead and tell—you've got to, kid. A clean slate from now on, remember—wipe out everything and start all over—no more secrets."

She crept across his breast, slipping her arm under his neck, her strong muscles tensing to hold his body close to her for this last moment they might ever be so close or near each other at all anywhere in the world during the rest of life.

For she knew that if she told they probably would not go on together; but she knew that if she did not tell now they could not go on.

She saw the porch that was lighted dimly still from the lamps inside go all dark, and the patter of rain on the palm leaves stopped.

Then light and sound came back, and her voice was finishing saying something, and Dickie was lying still with his eyes shut, looking as if he were dead.

So long a time passed that the rain lulled gradually, in reality, and came back hard again while she waited to know whether she had killed him or only made him go mad.

At last he got up, shaking her away, and walked down the porch, staggering as if he were very ill.

She knew that she had taken the rest of her life and crushed it in her hand as though it had been the life of a bird.

The rain hushed and flooded again, and she fell to crying softly in weak abandon on the swing back, and a little panorama of the impossible future unrolled along the wet screening behind the swing above the spattered floor.

He didn't come back, and she looked around finally, afraid he had slipped away into the rain. But he was standing down the porch still, his back to her, his head tipped back and his hands over his face.

She whispered fearfully: "Dickie——"

She got up then, hardly knowing where she was going, and walked to him, tiptoeing.

"Dickie—please——"

He winced away from her, wheeling, saying hoarsely: "Get away! For God's sake, get away!"

"Oh, don't talk so loud—Mom'll hear."

He went back toward the swing, staggering, and fell on the matted floor leaning into a chair by the screening, and cried. The rain from the bougainvillea blew on his head.

She followed and stood staring at him. She saw, too, Elsa sitting in the chair in her white dress, and it seemed that he was crying in Elsa's lap and Elsa was crying into her handkerchief, bowed over his head.

She thought she was going crazy, and shook her head violently, and Elsa went away.

She stepped up to him again and touched his arm, whispering: "Dickie——"

He flinched into the chair. "Don't! For God's sake, get away—keep away!"

"But—can't I *touch* you?"

He turned around then and looked at her, his face streaked with tears. He smiled at her and said huskily: "You were just kidding, darlin', weren't you? Just to see what I'd do? You couldn't mean what you said."

He groaned: "Oh, Jesus Christ!" and fell forward again on his folded arms.

She stood shivering, and said at last through her chattering teeth: "B-but it didn't mean anything, Dickie—it wasn't any m-more than any of those t-times I necked—it hasn't made me any d-different——"

"Hasn't made you any different!" he sobbed, laughing.

"B-but it hasn't——"

"Who was it?"

"I—I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No, I—I—oh, p-please—please——"

"Well, what the hell——"

"Oh, I was so damn drunk!"

"Oh, *God!*"

She chattered: "If I hadn't b-been, do you think I *could* have, ever?"

He said, laughing horribly: "Go tell your dad! Go tell him this is what's happened because I taught you to drink! Tell him I'll buy *him* a drink! Go on, damn it, tell him, and we'll all get tight!"

She whispered brokenly: "Oh, Dickie——"

He said, stopping laughing: "I didn't think things like this happened. Not to me. My wife—little Jan Custis——"

"Oh, don't—don't!"

He flung, choking: "And you came back! And lived with me again—telling me you loved me—pretending you were just the same as before——"

"I couldn't help it, Dickie—I *did* love you so! And I *did* try to tell you, and you wouldn't understand—you thought I meant I'd just necked again."

"Why didn't you make me understand?"

"Because it affected you so—just that much! You said you were happy before, why hadn't I let you stay? So I just shut up and went on suffering—suffering like hell, keeping from telling you, just to save you from suffering worse!"

"If that's how you felt, then, how did you come to get honest enough to tell me now?"

"Because you made me! And because I couldn't go on suffering for all the rest of our lives!"

He said expressionlessly: "Well, there won't be any rest of our lives now. Not together."

She knew then, standing by the swing in the dim light looking down at him leaning into Elsa's chair, that her heart in all its loneliness and bitterness and fear had never broken before.

She whispered: "Oh, Dickie—no, no—don't make me go away! I don't want to go away from you!"

She went on her knees beside him on the floor.

"Dickie, Dickie, take me with you! Oh, forgive me, please, please—oh, why should it matter so? I'll always be true to you from now on—I'll be the best wife in the world, Dickie, I swear, I swear—I haven't changed, I'm just the same as before, I swear to God! And I do love you so—I always did—I never stopped for a minute, even *then*—I did it *because* I loved you, Dickie—because I meant it to make me so ashamed I'd be sure never to go back to you, so you could be happy! But it didn't work that way—I was ashamed, but it just made me love you and want you more, and I couldn't *help* going back to you, and I'd take it back now if I only could, but I can't! We never can, Dickie, go back and undo something that's done—all we can do is go ahead and try our best to make up for it—try again——" She wavered, pressing back the tears, creeping closer to him on the porch floor. "That's all we can do all the rest of our lives, Dickie, if we make wrong starts again—that's all anybody can do, especially anybody that's married. Because—because that is marriage, Dickie—oh, don't you see that it is? Loving, but having little fights and hating a little, or thinking

you hate, and then making up and trying again, and then misunderstanding and fighting all over again and hating a little again, and finally going away, and then missing so and making terrible mistakes and wanting and knowing you love, and coming back at last and forgiving and being forgiven, and—and trying again——”

She was crying so hard, quietly, that she could scarcely talk, but she raced on, propped on her arm beside him on the floor where the rain spattered in: “I’ve been so crazy, Dickie! I wanted to be free and live my own life, and it drove me to you first—that I’m glad for with my whole heart and soul—and then away from you to New York, that I’m sorry for with my whole heart and soul—and then I knew I loved you so much more than living my own life without you, but after I came back I forgot a lot of things I’d learned, and it drove me away again, but I learned right away again what I’d forgotten, and it *wasn’t* that that drove me into this awful mess down here, because I’ve found out now, Dickie, that you never *can* be free as long as you love! I know now I never can be free as long as I go on loving you, no matter if I’m thousands of miles away from you, and I know I’ll always go on loving you, and that *is* my own life! So take me with you, Dickie, please, please, and let’s try again, and this time we will make a go of it—but if we shouldn’t right away, then we’ll just go on trying again, because that’s all we’ll ever be able to do—because that’s got to be our life——”

She crept close to him and sobbed in exhaustion against his arm.

He took his arm away. “Don’t, kid. I—I can’t——”

“Oh, please, *please*, love me again.”

He said faintly: “I do love you, damn it, but I—I can’t touch you! I can’t, kid—I *can’t*——”

She pleaded, her tears dropping on the floor: “But what can I do?”

“I don’t know. Oh, God, I’m all shot to hell. Maybe I’ll feel different to-morrow, but I don’t think so.”

She slipped down onto her arms on the straw matting. “Oh, I’m so tired.”

“Let’s go to bed, kid,” he said.

She said, "Yes," catching her breath, and pulled herself to her feet, whispering: "Come on—let's go."

"You go on. I want to stay here a little while—I can't talk to Mom yet."

She went to the kitchen and bathed her face and went upstairs. Mom came in her room, and she kept her swollen eyes turned away.

"Are you children fighting?"

"No. Why?"

"You sounded so funny. What are you going to do now?"

"Go to bed. Dickie's tired, and so am I."

She knew Mom was smiling.

"Oh, yes? Well, the spare room's all ready for you both. But Mother hates to have you run off so early on your last night for two long years."

"But we'll have all day to-morrow before the transport goes."

She took a shower, staying a long while under the cool spray, letting it fall gently on her reddened eyelids. She put on silk pajamas and washed all her old make-up away and applied new, and combed out her hair, curled tightly from the heat and dampness into soft waves, and touched it with perfume.

He came up presently and went into Mom's room and they talked a few minutes. He came into the spare room then, looking haggard, and found her sitting on the bed.

"Why don't you go to bed?"

"I was waiting for you."

"What for?"

"Why—I wanted to."

He took pajamas and a toothbrush out of his suitcase and went to take a shower.

In a little while he came back. She was in bed, and he shut the door quietly and stood looking at her.

"You can't stay there, Jan."

"Wh-why?"

"For God's sake, did you think I meant—how did you think I could, after——"

She got out of his bed quickly and stood with her hair falling over her hands.

She whispered: "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry. But——"

"Oh, that's all right."

She went past him to the door, wanting to die.

He put out his hand and drew it back, shuddering.

"Oh, Christ—I want you, Jan, but I *can't*—I can't change the way I feel—you're just not my darlin' any more."

She went softly out and slipped into her own room and crawled into bed alone in the dark.

SHE was dreaming of driving with Dickie in the rain past the blaring music of the cantinas when she heard Dad calling. She thought he was trying to tell them they had a flat tire.

He called so loudly that he awoke her, and she saw, blinking at him, that he was really standing in her doorway in his bathrobe, with shaving soap on his face.

"Say, Jan—can you wake up?"

She mumbled, and he said: "Pretty important—Steve's had a crack-up. Just heard by phone."

She thought she was dreaming still, and shook her head violently to wake up in her room alone, with Steve safe and sound at France Field.

She did wake fully, and saw that Dad was still in the doorway.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

He told her: "Steve's had a crack-up. On this side—some-where outside the town. They've got him up at Ancon—somebody just phoned from there. They say he's asking for you. Think you can get dressed and make it over there kinda quick?"

She staggered to her feet. "But—but—he isn't—he isn't——"

"Well, I don't know—whoever this was didn't say much—kinda sounded, though, as if he might be smashed up pretty bad."

She said: "I'll get dressed! Right away!"

Snatching up her clothes, she had forgotten all Steves but a Steve huddled at her feet, pressing the hem of her dress to his pale, suppliant lips; a Steve pleading, "But *love* me again, please—please——"

In five minutes she was running down the stairs. Dickie was below, talking to Dad.

She said: "You come with me—you drive—I feel all shot——"

Dad said huskily: "Tell old Steve——" and then didn't know what he wanted her to tell him.

They ran out together and got into the car and sped off.

"Which way?"

"Left down here and then follow the road straight around. It's right near. Keep to the left!"

"Well, I haven't got there yet!"

"On the left of the road!"

"What the hell for?"

"It's the law here."

"Oh, for God's sake."

He looked white and cold and hard, his face set. She prayed mutely: Oh, make him forgive me or I can't bear what I'm going to see!

The bougainvillea of the hospital. Dickie swung in, and they left the car and ran up into a building. They went through wards, and she caught at his hand involuntarily, and he drew away, striding ahead.

He asked a nurse: "Where's Lieutenant Lestours?" and the nurse led them through another ward and to a small room.

Someone was in a high bed with his face all bandaged except his pale mouth and the end of his nose and half of one cheek. One arm was free, with only the hand wrapped, but the other had the pajama sleeve cut away and was in bandaged splints, stretched along the bed.

She backed out quickly, too shocked to go in. She caught the nurse's sleeve and pulled her away from the room. "Will he—will he—get well?"

"Oh, no," the nurse said. "Didn't they tell you that? Poor fellow, he had a terrible crash. Are you the young lady he wanted to see? Well, you must go right in."

She stepped on the threshold again, staring, fighting to make herself go in and see Steve die.

Dickie was standing just inside the door, his cap in his hand. She went past him finally and over to the bed.

Very softly she said: "Steve——"

His pale mouth moved, and his bandaged head tried to turn to her.

He said in a faint drowsy whisper: "Oh, honey—God bless you for coming!"

Biting her lip hard, she told him: "Oh, don't talk——"

"Oh, honey—I'm so damn smashed——"

"I know, I know—oh, why weren't you careful?"

"Where are you, dear? Oh, cain't you let me know you're really near?"

She put her hand on his good arm above his bandaged hand. "Here I am—oh, don't talk, please——"

"Oh, God bless you, sweet. I couldn't die without seeing you again."

"You're not going to die, Steve!"

"Yes, I am, honey, but I'm not afraid if you'll only stay."

"I'll stay just as long as you want me. But you're going to get all right."

He whispered: "Cain't you come closer, honey? Cain't you put your arm under my head and lift me up, close to you?"

"Oh, I don't want to hurt you!"

"You won't hurt me, dear—it hurts worse to be far away from you."

The nurse came, and she pleaded: "Can I lift him up? He wants me to! Will it hurt him?"

"Not if you're gentle. Do whatever he wants you to."

She slipped her arm under his and drew him against her, standing beside his high bed.

She saw then by his puckering mouth that he was crying.

"Oh, Steve, you're letting me hurt you!"

"No, you're not, honey—I'm just so damn happy, that's all!"

She choked: "Oh—*happy*——"

"It's so sweet to die like this, having you again. I'd rather die like this than go on living, never having you any more."

"Oh, don't—don't—don't talk like that—don't talk at all."

"Oh, I don't want to make you mad, honey!"

She said, half laughing: "You won't make me mad."

She told him then: "Dickie's here too, Steve."

"Where?"

"Right here—at the foot of the bed."

Dickie said huskily: "Hello, Steve."

"Hello, Dick. You don't mind, do you?"

"Hell, no, Steve."

Steve whispered to him: "Would you grant a dying man's request?"

"For God's sake, Steve—what?"

"Make this kid happy."

She held him gently, touching her cheek lightly to his bandaged head.

Steve whispered: "I've loved this kid since the day I first laid eyes on her. I'd love her no matter what she did to me. I reckon I'll go on loving her always, even now. I cain't help loving her. You don't mind me loving her still, do you, Dick?"

Dickie stood with his head bowed, his cap in his hand. "Hell, no, Steve."

"I'd love her if she was the most scarlet woman in God's world. You know that, don't you, honey?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

"A man that's loved her once must love her always. There never can be anyone else."

Steve shuddered then, becoming heavier in her arms. "Honey—I reckon—I'm going now——"

"No, no, Steve! Oh, no, no, no, no, no!" She cried to Dickie, terrified: "Oh, get the nurse! Get a doctor!"

Dickie ran out and came back with the nurse.

The nurse said softly: "The doctor's coming, but there's nothing he can do."

A young doctor came in. He shook his head, murmuring: "We've done all we possibly could. We knew it was just a matter of a very little while. It's internal, you know."

She gasped: "Is he in pain?"

"Well, we've done what we could, but there is some still, of course."

Steve was whispering: "Honey——"

"Oh, what, Steve—what?"

"Hold me close to you—do you mind?"

She caught him closer, gently.

"Oh, if I could only see you, honey—I cain't even touch your face."

She laid her wet cheek on his bared arm.

He said: "Why, I can see you now, dear. You've got your breeches on, haven't you?"

She choked: "Yes——"

She fell to sobbing then, knowing he was going very soon now.

She pleaded to the doctor, panic-stricken: "Oh, don't let him go! Don't let him go!"

Bowed crying over Steve's bandaged breast, then, she felt Dickie's hand on her shoulder, gripping hard, and heard him say: "Don't cry, darlin'."

Steve whispered: "I'm not afraid, dear. But, oh, I did always hope I'd live long enough to do something for you—to make up for—for—and prove how much I do love—do love you——"

She wanted to be able to say to him: "You have, Steve! You gave me Dickie then, and you're giving him back to me now!"

But she could only cry her grief for him against his bandaged head.

He shuddered again; then grew quite still.

He whispered: "You be ready, honey. I'll bring the horses—right after school—at four-thirty——" and died quietly against her breast.

And now rain was curtaining the white and red town and the virgins' breasts of hills, and the *Château Thierry* was going swiftly out to sea.

Back on the pier Mom and Dad and Barbie were waving good-bye.

"Well, kid?"

"We're off."

"Damn if not!"

They stood side by side at the stern rail, and presently she told him: "That's Amador."

"Is it? Damn good-looking post."

He said after a few moments: "You'll like it where we're going. They say it's a swell little post. Right on the Pasig River."

"I know—Fort Santiago. Dad and I used to ride around it when we were in Manila before."

"Did you? You never thought you'd be living there sometime, I guess."

"No, because I never thought I'd ever be in anything but the Coast."

"Well—the Ordnance is a good branch."

He said then, looking at Amador: "We'll run over to Corregidor now and then, anyhow, and grab a look at red hat cords again. Colonel Nolan ought to let us park around once in a while still, for the sake of old times. Gosh, it'll seem funny without Frances around, though."

He said: "We'll be passing over Frances's grave. Did you think of that—huh?"

They fell silent, and presently Retreat came faintly from Amador, and the transport's bugle rang to meet it, drowning it out. The gun sounded from the fort, and the *Château Thierry's* flag came down its short pole, limp and bright with the rain.

They stood side by side, straight and motionless, and she thought, fighting down the old surging wild proud tears: I've stood Retreat a thousand times and always wanted to cry, and I'll go on now standing it and wanting to cry, till I die.

A car was racing along the causeway, its people waving.

"It's Mom and Dad!"

It followed to the hill at the causeway's end and stayed, fading to a dot.

The sea mist of late afternoon went away, and evening made ghosts of the island hills.

"Well, how about getting on down and wash up for dinner, huh?"

"I don't want any dinner."

"Don't want any dinner? What the hell, you've got to eat something."

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, I am, by gosh. Hungry as hell. What's the matter—you scared of getting seasick?"

"No—I just don't feel like eating."

"Well, you ought to eat anyway. You'll be hungry before morning."

After a few minutes he said: "Well, damn it, I'm going on down."

She stood alone at the rail, spattered by the blowing rain, watching the lingering city between the dim specters of Flamenca and Ancon Hill.

The night shut down, blotting away the little failing futile lights.

THE END

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